



Police Suicide Are You at Risk?

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Those of us in the profession have many reasons for choosing a career in law enforcement. We want to help others and make a difference. We care about people and often feel that it is a calling we are compelled to answer. Soon, however, we realize that it takes a special person with a heart for service to respond to the problems of society on a daily basis.

During academy training, we discovered a common theme that quickly emerged: the importance of officer survival. As impressionable new officers, we were inculcated into a quasi-military environment and taught to take control. In every situation, we must take control of the scene, the suspects, and—most of all—our emotions.

The nature of police work is inherently negative. Citizens do not call us when things are good. They call us when things go bad. Over the course of an officer's career, memories of the profession often are filled with many negative thoughts and few positive ones. The bulk of service calls are

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geared toward taking care of others. However, who is taking care of us?

Tragically, too many times suicide becomes the way officers deal with the horrors they have witnessed in the daily performance of their duties, along with internal stressors from their departments and external problems in their personal lives.¹ Relationship problems, coupled with alcohol abuse and the accessibility of a firearm, create a recipe for disaster among troubled officers who may view suicide as the only way out. They are in so much pain that they cannot see any other option. Officers often do not seek assistance because of concerns about confidentiality, changes in duty status, perceptions of weakness, and possible issues with future promotions.

What Are Some Causes?

First, identifying solely with our professional role can increase our risk for committing suicide. If we are not careful, our career can dominate other areas of our lives. The tactics and communications skills learned on the job are effective when dealing with suspects. However, problems occur when we take these home and use them with our significant others, family members, and children.

In addition, the profession can be lonely at times. Often, we feel that only other officers can relate to what we are experiencing because they have been there before. This can lead to cynicism and a lack of trust in others. Initially, we may begin to depend exclusively on other officers and then limit these to ones in our own department. Over time, that circle can become even smaller and include only a select few of our colleagues. This dangerous cycle can easily lead to social and professional isolation.

Third, when we spend every day seeing the negatives that society has to offer, it can be difficult

to find the positives. We begin to view life as one problem after another. Because we become consummate problem solvers, we try to take control by figuring out all difficult situations quickly and effectively, including those that may arise in our personal lives.

Finally, stress in the police profession is unique because it is constant. The type of stress simply varies in degree and duration. The role of a police officer in itself is stressful because we are never off duty. Operating in an environment where we are frequently exposed to high levels of frustration and danger leads to physical, emotional, and psychological wear.

Stress in law enforcement also is kaleidoscopic in nature. It may come from many directions: our administration, the type of calls we handle, the media attention, the court system, and our personal lives. If not managed properly, stress can cause us to become prone to depression, alcoholism,

anxiety disorders, and burnout that, in turn, may increase our risk for committing suicide.³

What Can Be Done?

Training is critical in addressing the problem of police suicide. Law enforcement personnel and their families need to be educated about the risk factors and warning signs of police suicide. Family members should receive this information because they may be the first to see changes in an officer's mood or behavior. Such training also should include information about making the transition from workplace to home life smoother for officers.

At work, officers must remain cognizant of their individual tolerance for stress. Supervisors and peers need to respond to any deterioration in an officer's appearance, performance, or

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attendance, as well as an increase in citizen complaints. Agencies should encourage their officers to seek confidential assistance from personal physicians, employee assistance programs, peer support teams, and crisis intervention counselors.

Conclusion

The law enforcement profession must convey to its members that suicide is a permanent reaction to a temporary situation. If officers were suffering from a physical condition, they would seek professional medical attention. What is the difference when an emotional one exists? Trained professionals can help prevent officers from committing suicide.

We are taught officer survival skills while on duty but seldom receive guidance on how to handle what we experience at work when we take off the uniform and go home. Training on how to make the role transition from police officer to civilian life should be required. Officer survival should not be just a day-to-day on-duty event. Instead, our goal should be to survive throughout our careers, making a commitment to living a full life well into retirement.

As law enforcement professionals, we have sworn to protect and serve our communities. We also must begin to protect and serve our fellow officers and ourselves if we are to reduce the tragic toll of officers who commit suicide. Training on the dangers of suicide and identifying resources available may help reduce the stigma of seeking professional assistance. As officers, we must begin to take an active role in helping all members of our profession understand the paramount importance of preventing police suicides. ♦

Endnotes

¹ Orlando Ramos, *A Leadership Perspective for Understanding Police Suicide: An Analysis Based on the Suicide Attitude Questionnaire* (Dissertation.com, January 15, 2008). The author presented this research at the second annual Beyond Survival: Wellness Practices for Wounded Warriors conference hosted by the FBI Academy's Behavioral Science Unit. For additional

information, see the May 2009 issue of the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* at <http://www.fbi.gov/publications/leb/leb.htm>.

² Access the National Police Suicide Foundation at <http://www.psf.org> for more information, including specialized training in police suicide prevention.

³ For additional information, see Inez Tuck, "On the Edge: Integrating Spirituality into Law Enforcement," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, May 2009, 14-21.



The Oliva family granted permission to use this photograph.

The suicide death of a close friend and coworker, Trooper John Oliva, motivated the author to research this sensitive topic. He ultimately completed his doctoral dissertation on the subject and dedicated it to his friend's memory. He has committed himself to educating members of the law enforcement profession on the dangers of police suicide. The views expressed in this article are his own and not those of either the New Jersey State Police or the New Jersey Department of Law and Public Safety.

Readers interested in discussing this issue further may contact Dr. Ramos at ORUSMC@aol.com.