

Personal Resilience in Law Enforcement

John H. (Jack) Wineman, Ph.D.

It was 2:20 a.m. For six long minutes, they chased the stolen vehicle through the neighborhood streets and alleys, ending when the suspect lost control and slammed into a tree. Officer Smith burst from his cruiser with his service weapon drawn. He ordered the suspect to exit the vehicle. As he cautiously approached the vehicle from the rear, Officer Jones observed the lone occupant frantically trying to get an object from between the front seats. Believing the suspect was reaching for a weapon, he shot twice, killing him. It was subsequently determined that the suspect had no weapon in the vehicle.

Is Officer Jones going to struggle through this unfortunate event, emerging as a stronger, emotionally better-equipped officer? Or, will Officer Jones become overwhelmed with guilt, anger, doubt, anxiety and depression? Will his job performance suffer? Will this incident take its toll on his marriage?

The outcome for Officer Jones will be dependent upon many factors, such as departmental policy and support, media attention, available psychological support, past training and current life stressors (financial, marital, health).

In this scenario, debriefing and counseling services were made available to Officer Jones. He was cleared of any wrongdoing by both the grand jury and an internal affairs investigation. There is no civil suit pending (yet). Media attention has dropped off. Officer Jones continues to be well supported by his department, his family and his friends. Nonetheless, the outcome is also dependent upon Officer Jones' personal or psychological resilience.

Too often, current articles focus on the stress of such critical incidents. It seems sometimes that "critical incident stress" captures more of our attention than the personal survivor qualities most emergency responders have. This combination of personal strengths is called resilience. It characterizes a law enforcement officer's ability to: (a) quickly recover, both mentally and physically, from an overwhelming experience; and (b) translate that experience into positive practice. That is, the individual ultimately grows personally and professionally as a result of the critical incident.

The purpose of this article is to discuss personal resilience and how law enforcement officers can strengthen their ability to overcome adversity. The literature identifies a number of personal qualities that add to an individual's

resilience. Among those qualities are personal awareness, having a solid support system, being confident, taking control and living a balanced lifestyle.

Personal Awareness

Resilient law enforcement officers tend to have a pretty clear picture of themselves. They have a good sense of their physical, social and relationship strengths and weaknesses. And, as a result, they are quite capable of capitalizing on their strengths and adjusting for their weaknesses. These officers are able to express their feelings honestly and appropriately. They can provide recognition as well as criticism. They have ability to maintain a degree of objectivity and do not take things personally. Similarly, they see the humor in their own errors and inconsistencies.

Support System

The literature is abundantly clear that having a strong and positive support system is one of the most important factors in coping with any type of adversity. Whether one has their own or family medical problems, debts, conflict with a family member, work-related stress, or other life stressors, a good support system is one of the best predictors for successful coping.

Resilient officers not only have a good support system, they know how to use it. They are more likely to talk to their co-workers and friends about a variety of events in their lives. They are capable of asking for help when it is needed. We aren't talking about help building a deck, you know. We are talking about help figuring out how to best handle the stressors life sometimes deals out to us. Overall, resilient officers have good, strong friendships and loving relationships.

Confidence without Arrogance

Optimism is another quality shown by resilient people. Resilient officers expect things to work out well. They are determined not to let others crush their positive spirit. They don't think they are better than others, but they do believe in themselves. They are realistic about what they can and cannot accomplish. These officers figure out what they need to do differently as a result of a new or unexpected experience. Resilient officers make an effort to continually learn from their experiences, especially their mistakes.

Taking Control without being Controlling

The ability to adapt quickly characterizes officers who are resilient. They can quickly analyze a situation, recognize the real and potential problem areas, and react effectively.

Resilient law enforcement officers are flexible, adaptable. They are able to improvise. They have the ability to change as circumstances change. These officers approach a situation asking, “What are the potential problems and what do I have to do to avoid or correct them?”

These officers have the ability to deal with a wide variety of personalities. They do not find themselves unduly frustrated or thwarted because the other person has some kind of negative attitude.

Resilient officers are stay calm and focused. They are able to combine optimism with realism. They can accept what is and are able to find opportunity in even the most difficult circumstances.

Having a Balanced Life

To maintain personal resilience, it is important to have balance in one’s life. Resilient officers exercise regularly and eat a healthy diet. They limit the use of stimulants such as tobacco products and alcoholic beverages. They involve themselves in a hobbies and recreational activities. They are involved with their families. They engage in outside social activities.

Even if they don’t go to church, resilient people tend to have spiritual values. They believe in an order and a consistency in life and in the universe. They have faith in the future, in the world and usually in a higher power.

These officers are able to create meaning for themselves or others even in the most difficult of situations. They realize that many of life’s best lessons come from some of life’s most challenging events.

Summary

Law enforcement officers see more horrific scenes and face more difficult situations than the average person can even imagine. Some of the incidents, like officer-involved shootings, are most often life changing events.

As a law enforcement officer, you train for these critical incidents. Similarly, effort should be focused on continually enhancing your personal survival skills. When the unexpected happens, your personal resilience will be

one essential factor that determines how well you survive the test. If you work at personal awareness, have a good support system, feel confident, take appropriate control when necessary and live a balanced lifestyle, you will be prepared with the best of them!

References

Flannery, R.B. (1990). *Becoming Stress Resistant*. New York: Continuum. In Girdano, D.A., Everly, G.S. & Dusek, D.E. (1997). *Controlling Stress and Tension* (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Seibert, A. (1996). *The Survivor Personality: Why Some People Are Stronger, Smarter, and More Skillful at Handling Life's Difficulties...and How You Can Be, Too*. Perigee Books/Berkley Publishing Group.

For those readers who would like to explore this area a little further, a 20 question resiliency test is available through the Resiliency Center website at:
<http://www.resiliencycenter.com/articles/resilquizform05.shtml>

Reprinted with permission from *The Nebraska Trooper Magazine*.