

POLICE SUICIDE: Understanding Grief & Loss

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More than any other occupation, law enforcement is an emotionally and physically dangerous job. Police officers continually face the effects of murder, violence, accidents and disasters. Rotating shifts, long hours and exposure to life's tragedies exact a heavy toll on police officers and their families. The results are alarming: high divorce rates, suicide, domestic violence, heart attacks, cancer, depression and alcoholism. Law enforcement, the media, and the public foster the myth that police officers can experience trauma and violence without suffering any ill effects. Research has shown just the opposite: when stressors are prolonged and overwhelming, an individual's ability to cope becomes difficult.

Suicide is a serious problem that is not often talked about in police circles. It is very hard, if not impossible, for us to understand why someone chooses to end his or her life. Shock and disbelief are usually the first responses to an officer's suicide.

Reactions After a Suicide

Reactions to suicide can sometimes be irrational and destructive. Remember, no one can "second-guess" or take responsibility for another person's reactions to the events that are happening in his or her life. And suicide is not the only response to life's problems. Suicide is the ultimate act of violence that hurts many people around the victim.

Anger and guilt are two very natural and normal responses to suicide. Yet, these emotions are very difficult for police officers to talk about. However, many friends and family members of the suicide victim talk about having feelings of guilt for not preventing the suicide. They believe that they should have seen it coming. Sometimes suicide is an impulsive act, one that has not really been planned out by the victim. A major difference between the general public and police officers is the immediate availability of a weapon. When a police officer decides to commit suicide, he or she doesn't have to go out and get a gun - the means are available at all times. In fact, the number "one" method of suicide by police officers is their gun.

Anger is normal after suicide and should be expressed – it's part of the grieving process. Sometimes the anger is directed towards the victim. It doesn't mean that you didn't love the person because you're angry. I don't believe that people who commit suicide understand the pain it causes for family and friends. For children, a parent's suicide leaves a lifetime legacy of torment. Many child survivors have told me that their parents didn't love them enough to stay and persevere through life's problems.

Sometimes anger is misdirected at family members, friends, colleagues or organizations. Anger can be very isolating since it can distance people from each other. It's not pleasant being around someone who is always angry. Talk about your anger to someone who can help you understand it.

Otherwise you may say or do things that you will regret later on. You have every reason to be angry – that's okay. (Anger is often a common emotion for police officers anyway.) What's not okay is taking out your anger unfairly on yourself or others.

Your anger is not going to go away on its own. Unless you find a way to express it, you may suffer emotionally or physically from its effects. You could become verbally abusive to citizens or family members. When you find yourself short on patience, quick to lash out and criticize or lethargic and emotionally down, it's time for professional help. Another response is emotional numbing where you just don't feel anything.

Reactions after a violent suicide, especially for those who find the person, are more complicated and intense. While most police officers have seen the aftermath of violent suicides, it's much different when the victim is a fellow officer. The shock and horror upon discovering the victim and the image that is engrafted in the mind can be overwhelming. Grief becomes more complex when this occurs. The mental picture will remain with the person sometimes accompanied by flashbacks, nightmares and thoughts.

Police officers all too often stuff their feelings so as to not appear weak. But emotions are normal and in order to heal, you must unburden what you have had to endure - you must tell the story. Discovering the body of a friend or loved one is shocking and painful - an experience that you will never forget. It is important to share the powerful emotions that this experience brings.

Healing & Recovery

Be gentle with yourself and your fellow officers. Grieving is a long process - one that is very personal and sometimes difficult to understand.

Talk to friends, co-workers, and family about the suicide. While traditionally this is very hard for police officers to do, it's a vital part of healing and recovery.

Unlike a "line of duty" death, police suicides are often enshrouded in shame and silence. While social attitudes have become more informed about suicide, there remains a stigma that people must deal with. All too often people are quick to form judgments. Survivors are left to somehow make sense of this terrible tragedy maybe even feeling responsible in some way for contributing to it.

It is important to discourage rumors about the "reason" for the suicide. While seeking to place blame on others is a natural response, it's not helpful in the long run. Besides, life is very complicated and there are usually several contributing factors in a suicide death. To think that one person or one event is the sole cause is not consistent with what we know about suicide. We can never know for sure what is going on in another person's mind any more than we can know all the reasons that cause a person to choose suicide.

GO TO THE FUNERAL. No matter what your beliefs or feelings are about suicide, funerals are an important ritual for closure and acceptance of the reality that the person has died. It is a final "goodbye" that we share with each other.

Taking Care of Each Other

There exists among police officers a very special bond. One reason for this is that police officers are isolated from the rest of the world by virtue of the kinds of work - related events they experience.

They are bonded in tragedy and the knowledge of how cruel life can be. The everyday stress of being a police officer can lead to serious difficulties when you add personal problems, too. The "image armor" that the public and the media portray also places a burden on police officers. But police officers have problems like anyone else.

When a fellow officer is experiencing personal problems, get involved by suggesting to him or her that help is available. A major contributing factor in police suicide is marital and relationship problems. It is also the number “one” reason why people come to the MPEAP. The job of policing affects an officer’s family more than any other job I know. Since 1988 over 6,000 MPD Officers, officials and family members have come to us for counseling. There is no cost to you and the funds for MPEAP do not come out of your dues.

The MPEAP is a Union - negotiated benefit that is privately contracted and staffed by licensed therapists with over 70 years of combined clinical experience.

All counseling is confidential except in life threatening situations. Officers are informed about this policy before they talk to us. When an officer is suicidal, the MPEAP’s policy in all cases is to remove the officer’s weapon and provide medical intervention immediately. There really is no other way. Many people have considered suicide at some point in their lives. This does not mean that they are “suicidal.” Conversely, there are some people who do not talk about suicide before taking their lives. Each case is unique and not always easy to predict despite the warning signs. However, the early warning signs in and of themselves indicate that intervention and/or counseling may be warranted.

Early Warning Signs

Know some of the early warning signs and get help. They are:

1. Personal and financial problems for which the officer feels there are no solutions
2. Increase in alcohol use
3. Work - related problems
4. Divorce or break-up of a relationship
5. Increase in sick days
6. Mood swings
7. Depression
8. Recent death in the family
9. Exposure to a work - related trauma
10. Use of deadly force

If you are concerned about a fellow officer but do not feel comfortable talking to him or her, call us. The MPEAP is located in a private building away from all police facilities. The telephone number is 202-546-9684

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