Police Officers Face Cumulative PTSD

by Michelle L. Beshears

Even with all we know about its effects and ways to treat it, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is common among police officers and continues to take its toll on their lives and those of their families.

Most of what people think of as PTSD relates to trauma suffered by soldiers and those in the military. However, police officers’ PTSD is different. Soldiers often get PTSD from a single or brief exposure to stress. However, for police officers PTSD tends to manifest over time, resulting from multiple stress-related experiences. This is better known as cumulative PTSD.

Understanding Cumulative PTSD
Cumulative PTSD can be even more dangerous than PTSD caused from a single traumatic event, largely because cumulative PTSD is more likely to go unnoticed and untreated. When a catastrophic event occurs, such as an officer-involved shooting, most departments have policies and professionals to help an officer address and deal with the aftermath of an event. However, the build-up of events that arise throughout an officer’s career generally do not warrant such specialized attention. As a result, an officer with cumulative PTSD is less likely to receive treatment. Unlike a physical injury, a mental traumatic injury can happen almost daily. When the demon of PTSD surfaces it often goes ignored. If untreated, officers can become a risk to themselves and others.

Causes of PTSD
Numerous events can cause PTSD in police officers, such as hostage situations, dangerous drug busts, responding to fatal accidents, and working other cases that include serious injury or death. But there are many less traumatic situations that can still be extremely stressful for an officer. Other stressful situations include, but are not limited to: long hours; handling people’s attitudes; waiting for the next call and not knowing what the situation will be; and even politics within the department. Then, on top of it all, officers are frequently criticized, scrutinized, and investigated for decisions they make.

Signs of PTSD
If recognized early and treated properly, officers and their families can overcome the debilitating effects of cumulative PTSD. The key to early intervention and treatment is recognizing the signs of PTSD and seeking help sooner rather than later. Some of the physical signs officers should look for in themselves include:

- Fatigue
- Vomiting or nausea
- Chest pain
- Twitches
- Thirst
- Insomnia or nightmares
- Breathing difficulty
- Grinding of teeth
- Profuse sweating
- Pounding heart
- Diarrhea or intestinal upsets
- Headaches
Behavioral signs family members of officers and officers should look for in themselves and in others include:

- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Pacing and restlessness
- Emotional outbursts
- Anti-social acts
- Suspicion and paranoia
- Increased alcohol consumption and other substance abuse

Emotional signs include:

- Anxiety or panic
- Guilt
- Fear
- Denial
- Irritability
- Depression
- Intense anger
- Agitation
- Apprehension

The situational training new recruits receive is simply not enough to prepare them for the reality of the experiences they will face throughout their careers. Most young officers do not understand the stressful events they are likely to experience during their years on the job. Many officers are also not adequately equipped with the emotional tools necessary to deal with the emotions they will feel when things happen. However, awareness continues to grow about the stress and trauma that officers’ experience. Organizations like the Station House Retreat offer both inpatient and outpatient treatment trauma therapy and peer-support services for police officers as well as all first responders. They also offer addiction treatment for first responders, and support for their family members.

About the Author: Michelle L. Beshears earned her baccalaureate degrees in social psychology and criminal justice and graduate degrees in human resource development and criminology from Indiana State University. She most recently completed her Ph.D. in Business Administration with a specialization in Criminal Justice. Michelle served in the U.S. Army for 11 years. She obtained the rank of Staff Sergeant prior to attending Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia where she earned her commission. As a commissioned officer she led numerous criminal investigations and worked with several external agencies as well. As a civilian, she has worked with the local sheriff’s department, state drug task force and FBI. Michelle is currently an assistant professor of criminal justice at American Military University and is fulltime faculty in the School of Security and Global Studies. You can contact her at Michelle.Beshears@mycampus.apus.edu.

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