Chiefs Lead the Way: A Top-Down Approach to Addressing Police Trauma and Suicide

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Note: this article is based, in part, on two “Hey Doc” columns that appeared in the Command Magazine in 2014, and a 21st century approach to identifying cumulative stress and trauma. Everyone has the responsibility to make sure they are fit for the difficult job of being a peace officer, but acceptance and permission from the chief relieves officers of any doubts they may have about obtaining mental health support when needed.

In psychology, we have a concept called, “the good enough parent.” It means that perfection in the parent is not required to raise a healthy child. By the same token, chiefs have all the faults and problems that everyone else has and can still lead effectively. You only have to be “the good enough chief.”

Challenge the concept that the “police family” is more important than your “real family.” The stigma against pursuing a balanced life has to be confronted and changed. Seeking good physical, social, and mental health has to be directed from the top. That’s the only way it works. Think of the cost savings of an emotionally healthy squad: less sick leave, less substance abuse, fewer overall complaints, less disciplinary problems, fewer lawsuits, fewer divorces, less grievances, better morale, and fewer resignations. There is no downside to safety and wellness. The benefits are ongoing and help develop a stronger and more cohesive police force.

Chiefs must set a new standard. This is a call out to all chiefs to have a mental health check-in and inspire all their sergeants’ and command staff to do the same. Then, the first-line supervisors can meet individually with each officer, dispatcher, and support staff member and give him or her the encouragement and support to go for a mental health check-in too. It all makes sense. Just try it.

The Mental Health Check-In

1. Visit a licensed mental health professional to develop a relationship that can be relied on later.

2. Initiate a confidential meeting that does not generate a report. No information returns to your department.

3. It is not a fitness for duty evaluation. It is a check-in, not a check-up. It is a check-in to learn new skills and set goals if desired.

4. The check-in is part of your normal maintenance routine. There does not need to be a problem to go for the check-in. Take it seriously.

5. It’s just a discussion about what is happening in your life.

6. Participation is fully voluntary and encouraged by the chief and all first-line supervisors.

7. It is the first step toward building and maintaining good mental health.

8. There are multiple options as to what kind of licensed mental health professional you choose.

9. There are multiple options as to how the sessions are paid for.

Every department can choose how to carry out the mental health check-in; it’s flexible. Chiefs of police throughout the United States must lead the way and safeguard the lives of those who serve and protect us all.

Note:


For further information about the Chiefs Lead the Way program, or how to set up a program in your area, please contact Marla Friedman PsyD PC, Immediate Past Chair-Police Psychological Services Section, Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police; Board of Directors, Badge of Life, Booklight@att.net or 630-510-3966.

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As police, we train in very specific ways. Often our training focuses on conditioning or repetition of behavior to create muscle memory and an automatic response during a high-stress situation. Recent scientific studies show us that it is the combination of two core concepts that allows for improved performance during high-stress times—conditioning and neuroplasticity. As police professionals, we are intimately familiar with the concept of conditioning, yet we still struggle to get proficient performance from our officers during times of high stress and high adrenaline. Could understanding neuroplasticity help us to bridge the gap between where we are and where we want to be?

Neuroplasticity is the lifelong capacity of the brain to create new neural pathways. In lay terms, this allows us to rewire the brain through conscious effort, so that the brain is able to function at a higher level of performance during times of stress. Self-directed neuroplasticity has been studied in depth by scientific researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Their research points to the process of mindful empathy being the most efficient way to create neuroplasticity in the brain. These findings show us that by combining modern science and ancient wisdom, we can unlock the secrets to expanding the potential of the human brain.

Mindfulness is the process of turning the mind’s eye inward and focusing on the body’s internal processes. Adding empathy or non-judgment to the process helps to keep the practitioner in an observant roll and contributes to a lack of personalization of the events. Often the infancy of mindfulness training begins with a focus on breathing. When mindfulness is mastered, the individual is able to be a gentle observer of the body’s internal processes. What begins with the breath soon turns into awareness of cardiac rate and thought processes. With practice, police professionals can become so aware of their bodies that when stress is elevated and their amygdala is engaged—trying to create our animalistic fight-flight-freeze response—they can learn to notice the onset of this and choose to engage the prefrontal cortex, the thinking brain, when formulating a response. The result produces officers who are no longer forced to react to high-stress situations; instead they create a proactive, thoughtful approach to emergency responses.

We cannot stop the onset of the automatic stress response of the amygdala, but by noticing the early warning signs through body awareness, we can stop it from taking over our actions. As soon as our conscious awareness recognizes the body’s stress response, we have engaged the prefrontal cortex and brought higher order thinking to this traditionally reactive stress situation. This creates the ability to view the high-stress situation objectively and take action accordingly. We, as police professionals, will be able to overcome the instincts of our emotions and make better decisions when managing emergency events. Instead of getting caught up in the moment, we will take control of the situation and move toward a resolution.

This scientific information has been recently reinforced through a study by Harvard researchers, which shows that the most efficient way to create neuroplasticity in the brain is through meditation. Meditation is a deeper version of mindfulness that allows us to assert control over our mental processes and better understand our pull towards an emotional response. Once aware of our instinct toward an emotional response, we can overcome it. During the study, participants were able to rebuild the gray matter in the amygdala and other areas of the brain by participating in meditative practice for 27 minutes per day for eight weeks. Participants of the study reported a greater sense of peace and well-being and reported lower stress levels. Increased benefits in cognitive functioning were seen with longer practice. Imagine if we could take these concepts and present them in our police training programs. We would see benefits in our officers through reduced stress levels and increased cognitive capacity.

Through the strategic use of mindfulness training, by the time new officers are out of field training, they would have an advanced level of body awareness and emotional control. By continuing to encourage the practice of mindfulness throughout their police career, we can develop healthier officers who show an increased capacity to make thoughtful decisions during times of high stress. This practice can assist in decision making not only during high stress times, but also in the complex matters our police professionals are called to respond to every day. This will result in improved police performance and an enhanced level of officer wellness.

As police professionals, we spend a great deal of time learning about the outside world; criminal behavior, evidence procedures, laws, and court procedures (to name a few). Unfortunately, hardly any time is devoted to learning more about ourselves. Using the information uncovered in scientific studies, we can begin to make a proactive effort to improve our profession. By making a commitment to practice policing mindfully, we can create a new generation of officers who are more resilient to stress and less susceptible to an emotional reaction to high-stress situations. By turning our attention inside, we are able to see ourselves and our decision-making processes more clearly. This enhanced level of awareness is extended to our view of the world around us and results in more mindful and empathetic decision making. Mindful policing will improve performance and results.

Notes:

1For more information on UCLA’s research, please see the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center at http://marc.ucla.edu/default.cfm.


By Laura King, Commander, McHenry Police Department, McHenry, Illinois
Psychoeducation: A Valuable Tool

By Lauren Parker, Police Constable, Crewe Police Station, Civic Centre, Crewe, Cheshire Constabulary, United Kingdom

Police work is demanding, with officers commonly operating in significantly challenging and often traumatic environments, facing the harsh realities of life and death and the extremes of human suffering and emotion. Whilst this is widely recognized and accepted as part of the role of a police officer, often overlooked is the critical issue of the psychological impact that such incidents may have on the human being behind the uniform, and how this is managed on top of other personal and work demands.

Officer welfare, specifically mental health, is currently a high priority in the police service throughout the United Kingdom. Recognition of the effects of this unique work is continually growing, particularly with the recent launch of the Mind’s Blue Light Project.1

However, what else can we do on a local level, to help prepare officers for the reality of life on the front line? Whilst there is no single solution to this issue, research has suggested that psychoeducation is a vitally important tool in which we can teach individuals about the possible effects of trauma; however, it's utilization within the police service appears very much in its infancy within the United Kingdom.2

Commonly, I hear statements from officers who have responded to, investigated, or experienced traumatic incidents such as, “I didn’t understand what was happening to me,” when faced with distressing memories of or emotions about an event. Whilst the very nature of police work means that it is impossible to control exposure to traumatic incidents, psychoeducation allows for information and knowledge to be disseminated to officers, educating them on the possible effects of these traumas. In turn, this education assists with the early identification of symptoms in themselves and colleagues, along with promoting help-seeking behaviors.

This innovative proposal surrounds a two- to three-hour trauma training delivered to police officers, which aims to give an introduction to the concept of psychological trauma and its applicability to police work.

Primarily, the training will center around common physiological and psychological reactions to trauma with an emphasis on the fact that there is no right or wrong way to react to a traumatic incident. Officers will be given the knowledge to enable them to identify signs and symptoms of trauma-related disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but the training will also aim to create discussion around barriers to seeking help—how to overcome those barriers—along with signposting to appropriate ongoing support if required. Officers will be provided with a guidance booklet to take away from the training, allowing them to refer back to it in the event that they or a colleague may require it.

Research conducted with police officers in Germany, following a training on psychological trauma, showed that 77.8 percent of those officers stated that they either “agree” or “strongly agree” that the trauma education was useful to them.3 This alone indicates the potential importance of such an input, which additionally and importantly can also assist in the transformation of stigma in police culture, promoting discussion around trauma and mental health and helping to make officers and the police service as a whole more trauma aware.

Whilst it is recognized that only a small proportion of officers may go on to develop disorders, such as PTSD, following exposure to a potentially traumatic event, knowledge of the signs, symptoms, and manifestations of trauma reactions is crucial in supporting our officers in such a demanding and unpredictable occupation.

Cheshire Constabulary’s What Works program centers around evidence-based policing, working in conjunction with academia to professionalize our police service and put procedures, which are supported by research evidence, at the heart of what we do. In line with this, Cheshire Constabulary is soon to introduce trauma training to its student officers (prior to a potential wider rollout), along with conducting numerous research projects that investigates how best to support those working tirelessly to support the communities of Cheshire.

Notes:
1 For more information on the Mind’s Blue Light program, please visit http://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/campaigns/bluelight.