

Law Enforcement Suicide Intervention

I am a Philadelphia police sergeant with almost 28 years of experience. Like most cops, I have been up, down and sideways on this job. At one of my low points, after being involved in a shooting on the job in late 1995, I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Throughout my career, I have also faced several other life-threatening experiences. After receiving treatment for PTSD, I learned that you can recover — and not only recover, but also come back to work stronger and with a sharper skill set that makes you a better, more perceptive cop. My experience made me realize that **no cop should ever have to walk alone**. I wanted to help make that a reality, so I attended trainings, chased after certifications and started helping other cops get help. One of the things that really bothered me was working in an environment in which cops felt like they had no one to talk to. Eventually, other officers and I banded together to start programs in Philadelphia where cops can use peer support to get to professional help. Two of the more successful programs I have been involved in are the Law Enforcement Peer Support Network (www.lepsn.org) and the First Responder

Addiction Treatment (FRAT) program (www.responderaddiction.com). You, too, can start programs and have help on standby for your brothers and sisters.

The reason I started with information about PTSD and substance abuse is because — especially for police officers — they are often precursors to suicidal ideation. I have also learned that cops often handle trauma on the job and in their personal lives simultaneously. We

THE SAME OFFICERS WHO ARE ABLE TO PERFORM WELL IN A CRISIS INVOLVING A CITIZEN OFTEN STRUGGLE WITH APPROACHING A BROTHER OR SISTER OFFICER.

are natural crisis interveners and almost always act appropriately and heroically. Based on research data from police suicides, we have learned that many of the officers had at least three major life issues going on at the same time. For instance, an officer may have abused alcohol (issue one), been going through a divorce (issue two) and discovered that he or she was facing disciplinary action at work (issue three). These are just examples; it could be a combination of many different things. The collection of these issues made many of the officers feel out of control, desperate and in mental pain that they felt would never stop. Another serious issue when it comes to suicidal police officers is that cops almost always use a gun, so the fatality rate is extremely high.

Based on our training and experience as police officers, I do not have to tell you the signs and symptoms that indicate

someone is at risk of suicide. What I do have to point out is that we go out on the street every day and help people with many problems intuitively and without flinching. But the same officers who are able to perform well in a crisis involving a citizen often struggle with approaching a brother or sister officer who is showing signs that they are at risk of suicide. Here is my most important push: If you feel that a cop you work with is in danger of attempting suicide, **have the courage to ask your co-workers if they are going to kill themselves**. Look them right in the eye when you ask that question, and don't leave them alone for a moment. It is also important not to change or soften the question. When an officer is in danger, your duty is to stay with them until professional help arrives or you get them to professional help. While you are with the officer, try to have a positive conversation that points out the officer's good qualities to turn the light back on at the end of the tunnel. People in that desperate state are in a "crisis window," and once they get past that state, they usually recover with follow-up treatment.

Two of the best training programs I have participated in are In Harm's Way, sponsored by St. Petersburg College (<http://policesuicide.spcollege.edu>), and Badge of Life (www.badgeoflife.com). Many great resources are listed on both programs' pages, and you can always call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at (800) 273-8255 for guidance.

I have also traveled the country for the FOP and have taught police suicide prevention, and I'm here to help. If I can be of assistance, email me at andycallaghan@fop.net. Please be careful out there and back each other up!

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