



A Personal Account: Mental Health Awareness, Peer Support, and Vicarious Traumatization

by [iacpblog](#)

Guest blogger: Sergeant Christopher J.A. Scallon, MS, Norfolk, Virginia, Police Department

Law enforcement has found itself adrift within the “perfect storm” of public mistrust, increasingly violent encounters, and the one-dimensional social media soapbox. The struggle to maintain our bearing, for the purposes of establishing some semblance of order and trust amidst such disdain is taking its toll. The vast majority of law enforcement professionals are just that...professional. It is because of these professionals that I am honored to be a part of an internal system tasked with addressing the inherent exposure to trauma by officers experienced on all fronts; peer support.

As a trauma survivor of a deadly force encounter, I can attest to the need for peer support. At the time, no formalized peer support unit existed for me to utilize. However, friends and a strong wife (also in law enforcement) helped me to find my way again. It was during my shooting review board that a respected supervisor pulled me aside and assured me that I would recover and I would eventually use my personal experience to help others.

Challenge Accepted!!!

The next few years were dedicated to obtaining the academic qualifications, certifications, and revisiting my experiences with the new eyes of a trauma-informed professional. I became a peer for several non-profit organizations and reached out to anyone I knew was involved in a critical incident. Unfortunately, my greatest opposition to providing help was the stigma associated with asking for it. It was clear, I needed to become a champion for change by sharing my uncensored experiences. I requested to teach a block of instruction for all new recruits titled, “Survival Mindset: Preparing for and Learning to Survive Trauma.” Pleasantly surprised, I was met with an overwhelming interest and acceptance of the concepts. A single class evolved into a sought-after presentation to surrounding police academies, and eventually around the country.

Too Much Success?

Almost immediately, requests to speak with individual officers about finding help and resources began flooding in...it worked!!! I went into overdrive, seeking as many resources available for officers in crisis and vetting the efficacy. I recall a single month when I was helping several officers and began to feel the effects of their trauma. I began falling into the trap of helping beyond my ability. I wish I could say I noticed, but it was my wife who identified my declining mental health. I

was becoming distant, fatigued, and frustrated that I was the only one doing anything (far from the truth)!!! I was regressing back to the damaged individual I fought so hard to fix. I had taken on the stress of the officers I was helping and I thought to myself...STOP!!!

Back on Track

With the help of my wife and my own advice, I reached out for help. I opened up to my wife and I spoke to a close friend and licensed counselor. I needed to understand that desire to help is decidedly different than my ability. Saying "No," while hard, is an integral part of peer support.

Healthy Peer Support

Recently, I was working with a local fire department to establish a peer support unit and providing resiliency training. Something a battalion chief said to me stuck. He said, "We mandate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for our fire fighters...mental health PPE is just as important."

We work in a time where peer support is a critical component of law enforcement, as important as our flashlight, handcuffs, weapon, or ballistic vest. Similarly, if we require our public safety personnel to maintain PPEs before going to work, law enforcement must ensure that peer support unit personnel are provided the proper mental health PPEs.

Resources

There are numerous local and national support services for first responders. Resources that address suicide, substance abuse, grief, depression, vicarious traumatization, wellness, compassion fatigue...etc., are available. My humble suggestion is that we become students of our craft and never stop looking for the help that we will inevitably need. As a peer support unit director, the degree of help we provide is met with an equal responsibility to care for ourselves. To help others, we must recognize the need to help ourselves first.

Please visit the [IACP's Center for Officer Safety and Wellness](#) for additional resources.

[iacblog](#) | May 23, 2016 at 10:45 am | Categories: [Officer safety and wellness](#) | URL: <http://wp.me/p1pIXU-13c>