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Richard C. Lumb

The College at Brockport, rlumb@gmail.com

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The Reality of PTSD in Police/Law Enforcement, Emergency Responders, and Custody Services

By

Richard C. Lumb, Ph.D.

State University of New York at Brockport, Emeritus

By comparison, our civilian police/law enforcement, emergency responders, and custody officer services portray similar symptoms to military personnel diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD). The effect on the individual and the need for action to adequately address aftermaths of stressful and traumatic events are not separate as to the victim. What is missing is a nation-wide program to educate and provide assistance to deserving public service workers with work-related stress and trauma issues. We respect the work of these individuals, as they encounter all types of events and situations in their delivery of critical services to the public.

It took approximately twenty years to identify and implement treatment for PTSD within the military. This similar level of early postponement exists with addressing the acute PTSD symptoms that also impact our police/law enforcement, emergency responders, and custody services (jails and prisons). However, what we are not seeing is the same level of decisive education and treatment activity on the civilian side, whose employees encounter multiple layers of stress and traumatic events in the course of carrying out their duties. Engagement with multiple forms of social deviance, crime, threat, aggressive action, injury and various manifestations, can be harmful to mind and body and are not unusual. Exposure equates to years of accumulated stress, adversity, and trauma (ASAT), the foundation to PTSD.

Kardiner (1941)[1] alleged that there is a lowering of the threshold of stimulation that often causes an enhanced state of readiness when encountering situations associated with foreboding reactions. In the private services, readiness accompanies entry into situations that are recognized as dangerous. It also resides in ordinary situations where a sudden change can bring immediate reaction that heightens one sense and results in elevated caution and awareness of what might be causing the hypervigilant response. Certainly, there is a career filled with response to injury and death, situations where the potential of personal harm is ever present. The multitude of situations public safety personnel respond to cannot be captured in a single TV show, as the smells, sounds, awareness of danger and what is experienced, too many, would be overwhelming and cause grave concerns. The responding officer and other emergency first responders have few options available but to persist in his or her duty, absorbing the combination of stressful and traumatic signals being processed.

We realize that the accumulation factor of dealing with stress, adversity, and trauma is career long, sometimes daily, with no let up by a public whose behaviors can turn instantly harmful or deadly. Combat for military personnel may equate to acquisition exposure to all manner of violence and dangerous situations in a relatively short period. With the new model of rotation, military personnel may spend weeks and months in these danger zones. The resulting accumulation of stress and trauma that is related to the dreadfulness of exposure remains present in the psyche, and for many a constant reminder of the experiences.

Police/law enforcement, emergency responders, and custody personnel services are exposed to situations and events that are repeatable throughout one's career. Death, accidents, criminal behavior, inhuman acts, threats to the individual and other engagement, while more measured in their accumulation, may result in severe personal adverse outcomes. The harm, while often of gradual accumulation, can terminate a career, bring irreparable harm, and cause the loss of skills and service the individual once provided.

Career long exposure to stress, adversity, and trauma due to mandatory response to society's dysfunction, deviance and disarray eventually takes a toll.

When the face to face encounters with threat of danger, harm or death are repeated for a 25 year career, we should not be surprised that our personnel suffer from multiple issues that closely mirror the military symptoms of PTSD.

Table 1

Similarity of Military & Police/law enforcement, Emergency Responders, and Custody Personnel Services Behavioral Aspect of PTSD

1. Repeat nightmares, vivid memories, or flashbacks of horrific events
2. Feeling emotional cut off from others
3. Feelings of uncaring or losing interest in things around you
4. Feelings of depression
5. Feeling threatened or in danger
6. Feeling anxious, jittery, or irritated
7. Experiencing a sense of panic and something bad is about to happen.
8. Difficulty sleeping
9. Difficulty focusing on something
10. Having a difficult time in personal relationships
11. Frequently avoid places that remind you of past events
12. Consistent drinking or use of drugs to numb your feelings
13. Negative moods
14. Excessive worry and concerns
15. Inability to manage time

16. Frequent accidents
17. Conflict and disagreements with colleagues

A Note on the “Unfairness of Expectation”:

I am aware of public expectations of police: a desire for greater effectiveness, better training, to foresee problems and eliminate them before they happen, to be fair to everyone, and remain reserved, and the list goes on and on. One example: in a university course on social problems, the instructor often read comments saying “*police officers need more training to discern a hate crime and to ensure that more people are convicted with that designation attached!*” What many do not understand is that while the police are often the first contact with an illegal, disorderly or disruptive person, they are not the final arbitrator. Police bring a charge, but follow-up action is then taken by the District Attorney and the Court for further action that might well change the original police charge. It may be dismissed, reduced, or some other outcome applied. Police are not omnipotent; they have a duty that is often reviewed by others with final result authority. Whereas police are visible and available 24/7, they are forced to act instead of other social agencies that are not available nights or weekends. In fact, extra duties are often piled on police without accompanying resources. Police/others are often unfairly judged and over-burdened with public demands that are often unreasonable.

The Harmful Effects of Accumulated Stress, Adversity, and Trauma:



Exposure to accumulated stress, adversity and trauma will eventually take its toll on an individual as what was viewed as normal now begins to fade into the distance. Most of us are aware that the role of a public safety officer brings the individual front and center to dangerous and abnormal situations, where the encounter becomes personal. We also understand that their presence at a location was mandated by dispatch to the call for service. What the public seldom sees or knows is

the immediate and pervasive accumulation of these negative experiences over time, to the officers or responder.

If we consider only cost regarding personal harm and what to do, it is extremely expensive to treat the disorder and address the damage resulting from adverse job-related engagement. The longer we delay providing assistance to this particular population, the greater the overall cost. Early intervention, when signs of eroding behavior appear, has the positive effect of caring for our employees, helping them return to balance and regain harmony with the demands of the job. Intervention involves deep agency commitment, support, and intervention. ***The longer we delay providing assistance to this particular population, the greater the overall cost.***

We invest in body protection equipment for emergency service personnel but avoid addressing psychological, emotional, physiological symptoms and social dysfunction that may occur, each of which bears the additional cost. We have numerous examples of

wrongful behavior, injury, damage, lost work and replacement expenses that often equate to substantial sums. At the end stage, divorce, substance abuse, the improper accusation of the use of force, the employee's suicide, and other manifestations occur – all are disruptive, damaging, and many/most are preventable. However, we must stop the denial and adopt a supportive and helpful demeanor for our employees.

The similarity between civilian forces and military personnel from a macro perspective are similar. They are sworn to duty, receive extensive training, carry weapons, are given authority to impose control, use rank as the designation of power, wear uniforms, and engage in responsibility that citizens do not have the authority to simulate. Time spent in providing civilian service engagement is a factor when considering the acquisition of symptoms that represent PTSD. It takes longer on the private side, but the outcome issues are where they merge. Grinker and Spiegel (1945) [2], reflecting on military personnel, noted that traumatic events imprint on the individual's memory, where it remains. Now, some 71 years later, we still have not learned that lesson on the civilian side.

Combat leaves a lasting imprint on the mind of the individual and may result in behavior changes throughout his or her lifetime. We do a disservice to our civilian employees when we fail to account for the predicaments encountered and the negative impact of accumulated stress adversity and trauma (ASAT) that may be a daily occurrence. We ignore the harm on our employees, preferring they "tough it out" or to use policy and discipline as the mediator when they do not. However, with that approach, we often wait too long, and the harm is difficult or impossible to recover from fully.

There are too many examples of uncharacteristic behavior, changes in attitude, actions that lead to discipline, resignation from the job, excessive sick leave, performance issues and other indicators that should give rise to a supervisor asking critical questions and seeking sustainable solutions that return the individual to balance work, home, and personal wellbeing.

I do not cast blame, but I do find the lack of inquiry and denial of decisive action, concerning. We have many excellent men and women, who through job action and encounters have acquired debilitating aftermaths that affect career issues. Job-related discipline, suspension, termination or prosecution may occur as the result of challenging behavior. These actions impact on peers, family, friends and others who share some aspect of the individual's life. These outcomes would lead to financial and social harm, perhaps preventable if particular stop gaps were in place.

A more in-depth discussion will eventually follow, but one of the most promising programs that a public service agency may consider is a peer support mentoring program. In a forthcoming book [3] we introduce the need for a program of this type as follows:

The landscape is littered with the remains of lost careers, devastated families, immersion in harmful behaviors, substance abuse, and in some cases criminality that

effectively removes one from employment and normalcy. The result is the loss of hope, disconnection from family and friends, and a series of lost ventures from which no expected result emerged and perhaps resignation that what has been lost cannot be recovered.

Whatever the causing factors, the outcome is never positive. The disarray and disharmony of life take on its reality, one that was never sought nor desired, but now that it has appeared, it is devastating and slowly bleeds the individual into greater weakness and loss of focus.

We all know of peers, friends and family members who seemed to sink into the waters of despair and attempts to change that fell on deaf ears, or the level of frustration was so enormous that further emergence on a recovery path seemed overwhelming. Offers of help went unanswered or elicited promises to change, to get back on track and to regain the former lifestyle; but it was not to be. Disappointment seems to attract further negativity, and soon the situation becomes impossible for even those who tried the hardest to bring about positive change.

It need not be the end of the story, for we are hopeful that segments of this manuscript can be used to help, to offer guidance and to provide tools that are useful in bringing about change.

Until civilian awareness reaches the level that produces intervention treatment and support changes with our civilian corps, we struggle to profess that the conditions needed do not exist. Hindsight is a powerful tool but often too little too late. Some view acknowledgment as a sign of weakness. It is not! Few members of society engage in or have the endurance to respond to and encounter the multiple forms of danger, harm, deviance, and dysfunction our police/law enforcement, emergency response services, correctional officers and other public safety personnel find with each duty shift. It is not weakness, rather an individual level of courage and endurance that presents itself. Over time, the accumulation of these encounters left unaddressed, can themselves bring harm to the person.

Our civilian service members take on society's more sinister side, respond to all manner of danger and sometimes lose their life or are injured to the extent that they cannot continue in their career.

We need the same mass of individuals who gather at the funeral of a fallen officer to stand tall and accept that there is no shame in adding to the equipment they wear as protection. Moreover, to deploy programs for the mind that are designed to help sort weighty issues put them in perspective and assist in maintaining balance in their life as they provide beyond the call duty to our communities. We have available assistance, why the resistance?

[1]. Kardiner, A. (1941). The traumatic neuroses of war. New York: Hoeber.

[2]. Grinker, R., & Spiegel, J. (1945). Men under stress. Philadelphia: Blakiston.

[3]. Lumb, R., & Breazeale, R. (2016). Peer Support Mentoring Program: intensify Employee Strengths & Commitment. Forthcoming book, Amazon.com.