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Strengthening Resilience of Our Police and First Responders

By

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Building Endurance to Manage the Effects of Accumulated Stress, Adversity & Trauma

The varieties of services that our police and first responders provide are difficult, often thankless, dangerous, and require a depth of fortitude not typical in most occupations. Being accepted into the profession requires a depth of character, integrity, solid values and the ability to pass a series of stringent tests leading to employment. Once employed, they are then required to pass a rigorous state-approved basic law enforcement or job specific training. The standards are high, and not all applicants fulfill them, demonstrating that personal resolve and grit is the rule of the day.

Hiring the best-suited individuals demands that we provide them with adequate training, equipment, support, technology and with the understanding that in their uniqueness there also reside the seeds of the detriment that can be devastating to their well-being. Thorough preparation is essential to consider because we often demand of those in uniform what we will not do for ourselves. Think of that! When something is challenging, and we do not want to tackle it, we call 911; simple, clean and efficient. Examining the types of calls, they respond to, engage with and bring closure to can be eye opening. In their response lies the potential for harm, injury or death; gut-wrenching trauma that over time is harmful to psychological, emotional and physiological systems that we all possess.

Arter (2007:45, 46), discussed the effects of dynamic stress on police and the strain of the duties they perform. Criticism, lack of social support, dealing with dysfunctional and deviant people, on a daily basis, is difficult in itself. Add the lack of rewards from seeing positive change for all the effort applied, not able to select the “fight or flight” option too stressful situations and other negative engagements; we can begin to see the forces of negativity that increase strain on the individual. This pressure manifests into what we witness on close observation, the potential long-term harm to the person. These harms may include:

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- . Burnout
 - . Health Issues
 - . Disruptive Behavior
 - . Impaired judgment
 - . Morale issues on Peers
 - . Behavior that may result in liability to the organization
 - . Alienation from Others
 - . Erosion of Public Confidence
 - . Diminished Job Performance
 - . Job Loss (Resignation or Dismissal)
 - . Increased Subjectivity to Discipline

A twenty-five-year first responder role exposes the individual to every conceivable human folly imaginable. No person can witness the destruction, devastation, brutality and other harmful outcomes by others and not be affected. Yes, some can manage these feelings and observations, putting them into a healthy perspective that does not cause detriment to themselves or those close to them. Others will seek to blow off the experience using diversions that allow them to feel better. These behaviors may include substance abuse, anger, withdrawal, promiscuity, and other harmful behaviors. Increased health issues, divorce, and suicide also potential outcomes as evidenced by those so recorded. Do we have a standard to measure our officers against to deem if adverse results are present? The answer is no!

There is a high reliance on administrative policy, rules, and discipline to manage employee behavior. Worrisome are the signals that often precede an incident where administrative action has to be taken. To this point, there are earlier indications that peers, supervisors or family members observe, but they remain quietly ignored in the hope positive change will take place, and the cause for current alarm reduced. In investigation after investigation, following some incident of police officer misbehavior, we can identify clear indicators that something is troubling the individual, but we do not ask, or we resort to the more commonly utilized “ass chewing” as the resolution. The continuum of those who resigned was fired or prosecuted grows and with seemingly little abatement.

Individuals who have not experienced policing find it difficult to understand actual reality beyond the simplistic “cop shows” provided by television. The pure nature of sitting in one’s living room, watching a police show unfold, removes the reality that accompanies a real life situation. The variety of what a police officer endures; the automatic lying by people when asked a question, physical resistance that often turns violent, along with other negative responses will soon become the anvil around one’s neck. The depth of complexity cannot be understood, and in that absence, people cannot make conclusions that are representative of reality. Complexity often leads to ambiguous decisions. Moreover, while emotion is often the motivating principle, it is

perhaps the weakest of all decision criteria.

What Is To Be Done?

A single solution is unlikely given the complexity of the problems before us. A concise and clearly articulated plan is needed, and it must be both comprehensive yet achievable within reasonable cost and high expectation of sustainable solutions to the problems addressed. I see this as a three part model consisting of the following components:

I. The Role of Emotional Intelligence.

Emotional intelligence supports a person recognizing his or her feelings and those of other people as well. This skill allows us to motivate others and to manage emotions in ourselves and people with whom we engage. If we label emotion as negative, we are dismissing an integral aspect of who we are, and to deny that emotion plays a role in our lives is repudiation. The emotional reaction to an event provides Adrenalin to our system that allows us to react appropriately to a disruptive situation. Depending on the situation and its impact on the individual, numerous bodily functions are affected and cause some response by our autonomic system.

Emotional intelligence assists us in understanding differences between what is happening in our thinking (cognitive process) and includes reasoning and emotions. In the First Responder environment, exposure to danger can elevate all manner of



response. Emotional intelligence provides effort to remain calm, consider alternatives available, what precautions may be taken, and assume charge or command of a situation to address what is happening. Emotional intelligence is a learning process and allows us to influence our personal performance, actions, and behavior. The alternative is to react. Moreover, research has demonstrated that emotional intelligence is a core component of one's leadership skills, and of your actions and reactions. Research shows that emotional intelligence highly supports you doing your job more efficiently. Success is

accomplished by the management of feelings and thinking, refereeing emotions in others, and making decisions on appropriate reactions.

The U.S. Navy utilizes emotional intelligence training to improve leadership and personal command style. Research of superior leaders found:

- They were more confident and outgoing,
- They were Task oriented and firm in expectations.
- They were more emotionally expressive and dramatic,

- Leaders utilized a people oriented personal style with a decisive command role,
- They did not hesitate to take charge, be purposeful, assertive, and businesslike,
- They were warmer and more sociable, appreciative and trustful (smile, friendlier, democratic, cooperative, and fun to be with).

Thus, in any role, situation, responsibility, and situational involvement, being in control of one's emotions encourage strong leadership and effective decision-making. There exists substantial information on this topic, and it is recommended the reader review some of it.

II. Personal Resilience.

Resilience for public safety and first responder officials must meet the needs of the organization and the individuals who frequently encounter traumatic and life changing events. A training program specifically teaches public safety officers skills that appropriately address personal and community traumatic events that they encounter in carrying out their duties. I describe this professional development as follows:

Managing Stress, Adversity & Trauma (SAT) Training Model

I. Broad View Aspects of Stress, Adversity, and Trauma (SAT)

1. Definitions SAT.
2. Illustrations of SAT germane to the field.
3. Indicators of SAT (self, family, friends, peers, colleagues, associations).
4. Why address these phenomena and let things unfold as they will?
5. Key to change - Focus on Results Oriented Outcomes.

II. Micro Effects of Stress Adversity & Trauma

1. Psychological well-being.
2. Physical and Physiological systems.
3. Individual stamina & grit.
4. Social and Cultural associations.
5. Family/Friends relationships.
6. Employment environment.

III. Mitigating Stress Adversity & Trauma: Role of Resilience

1. Focus on results.
2. Establish measurable results and outcomes.
3. Change individual behavior.
4. Inner and personal qualities - Be, Know, Do.
5. Employment/Organization responsibilities.

IV. Sustainable Solutions to Stress Adversity & Trauma

1. Strategies to mediate SAT.
2. Peer coaching strategies and applications.

3. Applied practice.
4. Establishing a plan for organization application.

Resilience is one of the most enduring skills we can use to offset the multitude of adverse events and encounters experienced across our career. It is foolhardy to expect that the diversity of negativity will not be harmful and in that belief the following training is critical.

Resilience training provides individuals with the ability to manage stressful situations and catastrophe by overcoming issues and problems emerging without lasting adverse effects. Tools and strategies are provided to assist individuals to find balance in their lives and to help others who are important to them. Public safety and first responder personnel and agencies must address the cumulative effects of encountering violence, dysfunction, and numerous other stress-producing engagements, prevalent in this occupational group. Resilience skills are an integral component of planning in life and used to oppose and reduce “risk factors” that threaten or endanger a person, an organization, or a community’s well-being and security. The ability to withstand pressure, to react with confidence, and to effectively continue to carry out one’s duties, while others are incapacitated, emerges from a person’s inner resilience. Resilience allows the individual to return to a balanced lifestyle quicker than someone who does not have these skills and knowledge.

Summarizing Resilience Training:

Resilience training can be summed up by the statements listed below. Their explanation, minor definition and a concentration of concepts are often sufficient as we seek to expand understanding and generate interest. It is also felt that unless we step up a bit (personal motivation), we tend to linger where we are, and generally, inertia is not sufficient when addressing new issues and needs.

1. Resilience training examines the process of coping with and managing hardship and traumatic encounters that take place in the delivery of emergency services. These contacts include high danger, potential injury, precarious situations, death, dangerous encounters, required engagement in events that others avoid, and numerous other stress inducing duties.
2. Resilience training provides techniques to handle acute tragedy and to bounce back from difficult encounters. These include national disasters, the potential of or actual terrorist attack, substantial threats to life and safety, long-term exposure to violence and destruction, the lack of adequate and responsive healthcare and a multitude of other scenarios that public safety personnel encounter.
3. Resilience skills and attitudes are key factors in wellness and health maintenance programs. Resilience skills like flexibility and problem-solving help an individual and the organization cope with adversity while continuing to provide critical services. Resilience skills are taught, and the program assists organizations and employees to

manage stress, promote wellness, to accept change, and help build team spirit and increase job satisfaction. There are multiple benefits associated with this training.

4. Resilience training provides tools that help individuals and organizations overcome unusual and traumatic situations that when encountered are difficult to reconcile and resolve. Police, Fire, EMS and other emergency services have an obligation to assist employees in dealing with stress and thus improve their overall mental and physical health.

5. Resilience training is interactive and includes small group exercises where participants share stories and examine how others react to traumatic events. When trouble strikes, it is hard to distract thinking from the overwhelming problems and simultaneously make appropriate decisions and execute actions that ease the burden and bring resolution. Providing and refocusing practical skills and attitudes is the primary outcome of resilience training. Training is participant active and helps identify ways to manage personal and employee needs that accompany constant exposure to high-stress situations. These same tools are useful when encountering short term problems that demand immediate solutions.

6. Resilience training assists public safety personnel in acquiring specialized skills and knowledge beneficial to address personal needs and establish a foundation for learning skills as a peer coach. Public safety is a unique and critical service for communities. Addressing and reducing the effects of exposure to danger and traumatic events is a shared goal of the individual employee and the organization.

III. Peer Support Mentoring.

All organizations experience some form of dysfunction from time to time. This same malady befalls individuals as well, who may stray from their job description, engage in unacceptable behavior, and assume an attitude that is dysfunctional and other behaviors and performance not supported by their organization. The problems may be minor, or they may create significant concern, loss of income or market share, and still worse face,



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liability, and court action. The work itself may cause undue stress either in the environment in which it resides or perhaps expectations, rigid rules, unrealistic expectations or other practices that cause employee reaction.

Reliance on policy, standards, and regulations, supported by a system of management and supervision, can maintain substantial control and provide the level of oversight needed; until some outlier becomes manifest and the chaos

that follows is disruptive. I speak of the subtle changes, those events that reveal themselves over time and when the exclusion level is reached, and a form of disruption or obvious problem emerge. Reaction seeks to end the issue from intensifying before more damage can occur. Damage control is both expensive and after-the-fact, as many of the emerging issues began earlier, and if noticed, were ignored. Damage control may

be too little and too late, and if additional personnel is involved, it also has implications that are not simplistic to fix.

No sleight of hand, weak discipline, ignoring the obvious and reacting after something happens, then promising to bring about change, can beat a proactive and straightforward approach to identifying problems and taking immediate steps to moderate them. It takes people, working with others, to bring about the desired outcomes. When these individuals are familiar with the organization, its administration, policies, and practices, they are more apt to engage and find solutions that are applicable. Finding the right fit to attain expected outcomes is enhanced by insight and knowledge.

Is there an answer? Of course, as no issue or problem that does not go away can be allowed to remain unaddressed? Given that charge, we either engage in finding solutions, or we agree that change is impossible and live with the mounting issues. Peer support is mentoring, utilizing employees from inside the organization, can be the first line of defense and provide a level of help and support to another staff cost effectively and with positive results. Carefully selected, well-trained and operating under the rule of confidentiality, we can succeed in an intervention before an issue escalates, thereby preventing a furtherance of issues and problems.

Peer support mentors work with peers, provide a sense of security and confidentiality and seek to change negative influences and behavior to reduce tension and return the employee to a balanced and compatible lifestyle within his or her employment. Waiting until the hammer falls, discipline, suspension, firing or prosecution is too little too late and extremely expensive. Dependence on rules, policy, and a strict discipline policy can be secondary to a prevention model geared to assist peers identifying and fixing issues before they manifest to a higher level. Perhaps it will result in a win/win situation for all.

