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PATROL

How To Spot PTSD in Yourself

Know what to look for so you can seek help for PTSD when needed.

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More than 50% of law enforcement officers experience a psychological trauma from a highly stressful event. Therefore, as a LEO this more likely than not applies to you. After such an event, you may develop symptoms leading to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Some studies suggest that 19% to 34% of sworn officers currently struggle with PTSD.

Dealing with PTSD often creates a cloud of mistrust. Seeking help from your agency is sometimes seen as taboo because of a fear that it might be used against you. I am not suggesting you shouldn't trust your agency; certainly, take what services they offer into consideration. The takeaway is to seek help, with whomever you feel you can trust.

The question of trust also raises the question of advocacy. In my opinion, you are your best advocate. You need to do what's right for you and your family. No one else can do that for you. One of the first things you can do to help start promoting your own advocacy is understanding your relationship with PTSD. It's better that you frame PTSD in terms of when it will happen to you instead of if it will happen to you. Unfortunately, in this line of work, the odds are stacked

against you.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

PTSD can sometimes seem very confusing because there are so many overlapping symptoms with other mental health issues. Merriam Webster defines PTSD as "a psychological reaction occurring after experiencing a highly stressing event (such as wartime combat, physical violence, or a natural disaster) that is usually characterized by depression, anxiety, flashbacks, recurrent nightmares, and avoidance of reminders of the event." If any of that sounds too familiar, please go speak to a professional that can help you.

With what officers see and go through, I don't know of any way to reliably fend off PTSD. For first responders, PTSD tends to manifest over time, resulting from multiple stress-related experiences. For example, how many dead babies does it take before it affects you? How many mangled bodies wrapped up in car accidents? How hard is it to get the images of an elderly person's decomposing body out of your mind?

On the flip side, it's not always about blood and guts. The key word in post-traumatic stress disorder is stress. Stress can be caused by many things including prolonged work hours, the ebb and flow of office politics, and dealing with the never-ending stream of people that seem to hate you just because you're a cop.

PTSD is not a symptom but a group of symptoms. As mentioned earlier, PTSD includes depression, anxiety, flashbacks, and recurrent nightmares. Though the symptoms act individually, they contribute to the whole. In some cases, PTSD can lead to suicide.

Suicide

As a military veteran, I am very aware of the association between PTSD and suicide. One study shows that up to 22 veterans commit suicide every day; that's roughly one every 65 minutes. This is the number you hear about the most from the news media and veteran groups. One fact that you don't often hear is that

first responders commit suicide too.

The numbers we are used to seeing about officer deaths come from the Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted (LEOKA) report. Unfortunately, LEOKA only covers felonious deaths, accidental deaths, and assaults while an officer was on duty. It is not a true reflection of how many officers die each year.

According to a study done by Blue H.E.L.P. (<https://bluehelp.org>), a Massachusetts-based nonprofit run by active and retired police officers, between the years 2016 and 2018 more police officers died from suicide than for any other reason. For example, in 2018 144 police officers were killed in the line of duty, and yet in that same year 159 officers took their own lives. PTSD is very real and very much an active issue in law enforcement whether we choose to admit it or not.



PTSD Risk

According to the Mayo Clinic, some factors may make you more likely to develop PTSD after experiencing a traumatic event. Use this list to help take a risk inventory:

- Experiencing intense or long-lasting trauma
- Having experienced other trauma earlier in life, such as childhood abuse
- Having a job that increases your risk of being exposed to traumatic events, such as military personnel and first responders
- Having other mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression
- Having problems with substance misuse, such as excess drinking or drug use
- Lacking a good support system of family and friends
- Having blood relatives with mental health problems, including anxiety or depression

Learn to Recognize the Symptoms

The Mayo Clinic advises that PTSD may start within one month of a traumatic event, but sometimes symptoms may not appear until years after the event. These symptoms cause significant problems in social, work, and relationship settings. They can also interfere with your ability to go about your normal daily tasks.

PTSD symptoms generally fall into four types: intrusive memories, avoidance, negative changes in thinking and mood, and changes in physical and emotional reactions. See if any of these applies to you:

Intrusive memories. Symptoms of intrusive memories may include:

- Recurrent, unwanted distressing memories of the traumatic event
- Reliving the traumatic event as if it were happening again (flashbacks)
- Upsetting dreams or nightmares

- Severe emotional distress or physical reactions to something that reminds you of the traumatic event

Avoidance. Symptoms of avoidance may include:

- Trying to avoid thinking or talking about the traumatic event
- Avoiding places, activities, or people that remind you of the traumatic event

Negative changes in thinking and mood. Symptoms of negative changes in thinking and mood may include:

- Negative thoughts about yourself, other people, or the world
- Hopelessness about the future
- Memory problems, including not remembering important aspects of the traumatic event
- Difficulty maintaining close relationships
- Feeling detached from family and friends
- Lack of interest in activities you once enjoyed
- Difficulty experiencing any positive emotions
- Feeling emotionally numb

Changes in physical and emotional reactions. Symptoms of changes in physical and emotional reactions (also called arousal symptoms) may include:

- Being easily startled or frightened
- Always being on guard for danger
- Self-destructive behavior, such as drinking too much or driving too fast
- Trouble sleeping
- Trouble concentrating
- Irritability, angry outbursts, or aggressive behavior
- Overwhelming guilt or shame

Remember Retirees

The bulk of information found in magazines or on the internet focus on officers

still working. But what if you are approaching retirement or are already retired like I am? Retirement sometimes involves one of life's biggest jokes. Meaning, you've had a successful career and retire; and just when you think it's time to start enjoying a stress- and drama-free life, PTSD rears its ugly head.

The reason [PTSD](#) can have a delayed reaction is during your career you learned to either suppress or minimize what was really going on with you. Since stress is a normal part of the job, you just suck it up, focus on your work, and learn to push things aside. Now that you no longer need to minimize or suppress what's going on, the symptoms may start manifesting themselves. Retirement is no cure for PTSD, and for some it may well be the start of it.

Final Thoughts

If you work in law enforcement long enough, you will most likely experience psychological trauma brought on by a highly stressful event. You need to come to terms with this and be prepared to recognize PTSD in yourself. Seeking help early is better than using negative coping mechanisms like drug or alcohol abuse.

Hopefully no one gets to the point of considering suicide. But for those who reach that point, there are resources available, including the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255) and Safe Call Now (1-206-459-3020), which offers services specifically for first responders. I pray that 2019 is better for law enforcement than the last three years and that in some small way this article helps.

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