

You Can't Make it Alone in Law Enforcement

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So, you joined law enforcement to help people. You wanted to make a difference in your community, in your world. But, the longer you work in law enforcement, the more you realize the world is a messed up place. You get knocked down. You see things you wish you had never seen. You get cynical. You may even feel depressed or tempted to turn to alcohol or other substances or behaviors to numb the pain or wake you up from the numbness you constantly feel.

If you have been there before or find yourself there at this very moment, so have your peers. Of all the seasoned officers I have spoken with, the vast majority has admitted to starting their careers with excitement and ambition, then becoming jaded and cynical, before finally turning to someone like a therapist or a peer supporter for help.

Want to know a secret? The shame of getting help is gone. It used to be that first responders threw around the phrase "Suck it up, buttercup" and forced peers into silence because of the stigma associated with having emotional wellness struggles related to their jobs. But, that stigma is gone now because of peer support and change is unfolding in the world of first responder emotional wellness.

Now, police officers are accepting that you can't make it alone as a first responder. Your peers are your greatest resource in law enforcement. There are areas where their strengths shine, and there are areas where your strengths shine. Likewise, you have a breaking point and they have a different breaking point. Differences can either drive you apart, or they can create teamwork. When you are struggling, it might be a peer's strongest moment. When they are hitting their breaking point, you might be maximally motivated. Help each other.

Did you know that high-stress situations tend to polarize people and can create a pack mentality? The problem with the pack mentality is that someone is always on the outside. The pack, then, bonds over shared animosity toward the outsider. That person may be able to survive alone for a short period of time, but loneliness actually weakens an individual's emotional and physical fortitude! In fact, loneliness causes the brain to release more of the chemical norepinephrine, which weakens the immune system similar to the way an infection would. And, loneliness increases white blood cell count, which triggers inflammation in the body.

Resiliency Training comes directly against the pack mentality by teaching the value of exposing vulnerability to teammates. This helps police officers bond over vulnerability, rather than bonding over making someone the outsider. Are you keeping someone on the outside? It is up to you to bring him in. His performance will improve and so will his wellbeing.

In order to help your fellow law enforcement officers survive and thrive in this field, you need to communicate with them. Sometimes people create their own prisons in their minds. The old trend of "stuffing" emotional pain are gone. It is time to start the talking. Both giving and receiving communication breaks down walls. When you are vulnerable, it creates safe space for them to be vulnerable, and trust is built. You must know each other's stories to become a team.

It is up to you to write a new story in your peer circle. Teamwork is the only way to survive as a whole, well individual in a career as trying as this. Who do you need to start communicating with?

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