

A Brief Discussion of Effective Ways to Teach Potentially Life-Saving Psychology

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ABSTRACT

Police officers are exposed to a plethora of potentially life-threatening incidents over the course of their careers. These events cause specific psychological harm to police officers. Even though police departments aim to provide their police personnel with advanced technological equipment and effective operational training, questions remain about the degree to which police officers are adequately trained to survive the often debilitating psychological challenges of police work. In this paper, some relevant psychological research findings will be presented to demonstrate the ways in which police officers can be better prepared for the mental and emotional adversities of their jobs. The authors provide an action plan for psychological scientific and clinical knowledge to be incorporated into police training curricula in the academy, during continuing professional education, and through on-duty field training. The argument is advanced that law enforcement executives and administrators should directly focus on officers' mental preparedness and psychological survival.

Keywords: police trauma; police compassion fatigue; police moral injury; stress; emotional regulation; psychological training

INTRODUCTION

The stressful nature of police work is common knowledge. Thanks to books, movies, and television programs, the public has been exposed to the real and fictionalised dangers that officers encounter. For example, former police officer and best-selling author Joseph Wambaugh peeled back the veneer and exposed some of the deep seated psychological issues that impact many police officers. Some of these stressors are operational (i.e., on-duty experiences), some stressors are organisational (e.g., staffing, resources), and some are environmental (e.g., the relationship with the community, crime rates).

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Although mental health practitioners have provided clinical services to police officers for decades, it has been difficult for psychologists to translate the science into something practical to be used in police training. One veteran police sergeant expressed his frustration after a psychological training class when he said “*Doc, too much analysis brings paralysis.*” According to this officer, psychologists (and other healthcare providers) should leave the arcane science in the university classroom. Instead of simply teaching psychological principles to officers, they should adapt the science and provide officers with pragmatic applications that can be used on- and off-duty.

Additionally, the field of psychology has made multiple contributions to public welfare in the form of treatment and assessment methods, policy programs, and psychoeducation, among others. Psychoeducation has been defined as a didactic way of providing an individual or a group of people with information that enables them to better understand—and, hence, cope with—an issue or a psychological matter (Bauml, 2006). Over the years, psychoeducation has been used with different populations, including patients suffering from bipolar disorder (Colom et al., 2003), schizophrenia (McFarlane et al., 1995), and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Neuner et al., 2004). However, before practitioners can undertake any sort of practical work with a particular client population, they need more than their knowledge of psychological practices and principles; they must have a keen awareness of the specific needs and characteristics of the members of the population with whom they will be working. This raises the central question of the present paper: since psychological knowledge appears to offer tremendous benefits to the health and wellbeing of police officers, how can healthcare professionals teach psychology to police officers in an efficient and effective manner?

Identifying the Issue

Police officers experience myriad critical incidents and traumatic stressors in the line of duty, which have the potential to negatively impact their health and wellbeing. Also, officers’ wellness is compromised by the chronic and cumulative influence of the organisational, operational, and environmental stressors confronted on a daily basis. Take the following

examples: 1) a police officer responds to the death of a child who happens to be the same age as his or her own child. The officer must secure the scene, while simultaneously providing some comfort to the distraught family; 2) a police officer pursues an armed suspect, on foot, who just committed a robbery. During the pursuit, the officer is faced with a “shoot-don't shoot” decision; 3) a police officer makes a traffic stop in a high crime area, at night, and the driver and occupants immediately start yelling and cursing at the officer. The police officer must remain calm, use all officer-safety protocols, and attempt to de-escalate the situation. These examples could happen to the same officer on consecutive shifts or even on the same shift. To make matters more difficult, the officer has to juggle stressors from his or her personal life, respond to the scrutiny of supervisors who will evaluate all of the officer's actions, and cope with the threat of citizen complaints and with unwanted media attention.

The majority of officers are doing the job for the right reasons: they want to help people who cannot help themselves, they want to protect people who cannot protect themselves, and they want to be part of the community. Nevertheless, the media tend to emphasise negative police behavior. This spotlight shines on all officers, not just the few bad apples. Furthermore, due to social media, cell phone videos, dash cams, and police body-worn cameras, police officers find themselves under the microscope 24/7, making their every action and word open to examination and critique. This has become a new form of stress for officers; many are reluctant to make a traffic stop or follow their training for fear that they will become the subject of the next viral video.

As part of their training in the police academy, as well as during subsequent continuing professional education throughout their career, officers are often taught psychological principles as a separate lecture- or workshop-based course. Critics of this pedagogical approach argue that it isolates the content within a classroom setting, which may (understandably) limit the ability of trainees to apply the concepts and skills in real-world settings. Indeed, considering the many challenges that officers experience while on-duty, translating the theoretical knowledge learned in the classroom to actual action while on patrol can be exceedingly difficult. There are two concerns. First, no one is suggesting that

psychological knowledge could train police officers to become clinicians. However, there are numerous psychological principles that, when applied, would help police officers do their jobs more effectively. Teaching officers how to use active listening skills and tactical empathy, for example, will help to defuse and deescalate situations with volatile individuals. This has to be done in a scenario-based, active learner modality, so that officers are able to practice and master these techniques. Secondly, psychological knowledge may be crucial for an officer's survival. Therefore, rather than teaching convoluted theories about, for example, the brain and body's reaction to stress, officers need to be taught how to put the psychological theories of wellness into practice, both on-duty and in their day-to-day lives.

Recommended Action Plan

The authors suggest that psychological knowledge should be incorporated into operational police practices in a manner that considers the multiple challenges that officers experience in the line of duty. To this end, psychologists should partner with police executives to determine effective ways of incorporating psychological principles and study findings into police practice. Although attempts to apply psychological knowledge in specific emergency situations may be ineffective because officers respond to a wide variety of incidents, psychological knowledge may nevertheless be viewed as an integral component of the major cluster of challenging issues (not incidents per se) that affect police officers. The following paragraphs discuss some of these challenges and how they can be addressed and processed by incorporating psychological knowledge.

Stress Reactivity. Given the pervasiveness of police officers' exposure to various stressors, psychologists can provide many evidence-based techniques to help officers manage their stress. Some of these techniques can be learned off-duty during individual or group sessions and utilised while on-duty, for example, progressive muscle relaxation, mindfulness, and controlled breathing (e.g., Barlow, 2007). Also, health-care professionals can teach and reinforce stress management techniques even while officers are on-duty. This can occur with the squad before a shift during roll-call and, even, in the field between calls. The routine presence of mental health professionals emphasises the positive

psychology aspect of wellness and stress management and destigmatises officers' interactions with clinicians. Furthermore, officers can be shown how employing such techniques before and after exposure to critical incidents may help them to significantly improve their ability to manage the resultant stress and to strengthen their resilience following such events (e.g., Andersen et al., 2015).

Emotion Regulation. Despite public expectations regarding appearance and deportment, officers experience emotions, such as fear and anger, which can affect their ability to think clearly and make appropriate decisions in the line of duty. Psychologists can teach officers techniques designed to regulate their emotional reactions. Emotion regulation training has been shown to improve officers' ability to accept and tolerate negative emotions, support themselves in distressing situations, and successfully process emotionally challenging situations (Berking, Meier, Wupperman, 2010). Because of concerns with liability, police executives can be convinced of the value of implementing emotion regulation training, but the training must be accompanied by subsequent reinforcement; officers should be held responsible to consistently demonstrate the skills that were taught.

Moral Injury and Distress. Police officers frequently experience moral dilemmas in the line of duty. In some of these situations, officers feel distress as a result of what they perceive to be a conflict between law and order on the one hand, and the reality of human society on the other. For instance, an officer may be ordered to conduct traffic stops and give out tickets in an underprivileged community where he or she knows that the violators will not be able to afford the citation. Similarly, an officer who responds to a critical incident (e.g., domestic violence, abused children) may question his or her ability to serve the community effectively; such officers begin to feel distress because they are unable to prevent harm from befalling innocent people.

Another form of psychological trauma that some officers experience is moral injury. This concept was developed by military scholars to describe the experience of being exposed to or failing to prevent atrocities during combat (Litz et al., 2009). Although the study of moral injury among police officers is still in its infancy (Papazoglou & Chopko,

2017), many officers experience this phenomenon because of what they encounter on duty. The harm caused by exposure to morally injurious incidents has considerable potential to negatively impact officers' job performance. In addition to experiencing intrusive levels of anger, shame, and guilt, morally injured officers begin to question whether there is any justice in this world. Leaders in the law enforcement can establish open dialogues with their personnel regarding their experiences of such events while in the line of duty (e.g., Kalvermark et al., 2004; Litz et al., 2009). Similarly, psychologists who work with police should collaborate with police executives to establish mechanisms to help officers identify (and share) the moral dilemmas and morally distressing situations they have experienced on the job.

Psychologists can help officers cope with morally injurious and distressing incidents. Officers should receive knowledge about duty-related moral dilemmas. They should have a mechanism to articulate their morally ambiguous experiences and receive support and hands-on training about proven techniques for dealing with the psychological impact of these experiences. These techniques include journaling, attending group meetings, and practicing some form of spirituality.

Compassion Fatigue. Officers are frequently exposed to the aftermaths of violent crimes, natural catastrophes, fatal accidents, and all other types of general human suffering. Furthermore, officers are often required to provide support to civilians or victims who may be experiencing feelings of desperation and emotional suffering. As a result of these demands, officers may experience compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue refers to the "cost of caring" for those who suffer (Figley, 1995, 2002) and often results from an officer's inability to emotionally connect with victims or, at the other extreme end of the spectrum, to emotionally disengage from their suffering (Figley, 1995, 2002; Papazoglou, 2017). However, research has shown that the impact of compassion fatigue may be mitigated by compassion satisfaction, which refers to an officer's capacity to feel appreciation and satisfaction for helping those who suffer (Figley 1995, 2002). To this end, psychologists may help officers improve their ability to recognise situations that could lead to compassion fatigue. Likewise, psychologists could instruct officers

to apply tangible techniques that would enable them to recognise the value of their service to their communities. For instance, letters of appreciation or gratitude have been successfully used in work with military personnel as a way of helping them appreciate the value of their services (Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011). Similarly, police officers can be helped to develop compassion satisfaction through the use of gratitude exercises and letters of appreciation.

CONCLUSION

Police officers attend various training sessions throughout their careers. Who delivers the information in these training sessions is as important as the particular lesson or curriculum itself. Police officers consider themselves to be a family and tend to believe that those outside of their family cannot relate to their complex world or their struggles. An officer might say, “Do my job for a while, then we’ll talk.” Unfortunately, many times, perceived legitimacy comes only when an established officer delivers the training. Therefore, for anything outside of the basic law enforcement realm, it is important for non-law enforcement personnel to collaborate with law enforcement instructors for training. Non-law enforcement trainers should spend time in the field with police officers to gain officers’ respect and earn legitimacy.

The authors have emphasised that psychological survival should be considered of equal importance to physical survival for police officers in the line of duty. Indeed, police departments often disregard the critical role of psychological survival for their officers. However, as two interrelated structures, mind and body should be equally prioritised and supported. To this end, psychologists can play a vital role by collaborating with police executives to develop training curricula that is accessible and that can be easily applied to police practice. Although it is important for officers to learn about psychological theories via lectures and workshops, police officers would benefit immensely from the introduction of tangible psychological skills that can be instantly applied within their day-to-day work. This approach would allow officers to utilise preventative skills, which would help them prevent many of the debilitating impacts that their work can have on their health and wellness. The Israeli army, for example, has pioneered “psychological gyms” in which personnel can “work out” to

cope with trauma-related issues (Cobb, 2013). Police departments are encouraged to institute similar resources. Ultimately, mental health professionals can help police officers understand the vital importance that psychological knowledge plays in their psychological survival.

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