



by Stephanie Conn

## Cops seeking help

If a doctor told you that you have cancer, what's the first thing you would do? Tell family members? Contact an oncologist to outline your treatment regime? Would you let your friends, co-workers and employer know about your health concerns?

Now, let's change the situation. You have depression or a post-traumatic stress disorder. Would you do the same thing as with your cancer diagnosis or deny or hide it? Perhaps you would try to resolve it on your own?

Unfortunately, for many the stigma of "mental" illness and the perceived sense of weakness prevents individuals from seeking the same levels of social support and treatment as they would with a "physical" illness. The distinction made between "mental" and "physical" illness is misguided. The mind and body are not separate entities. Brain scans of persons with post-traumatic stress disorder are different than those who do not have the disease. The same is true of other supposedly "mental" illnesses. My hope is that, in time, we will stop using that term as it is proven to be inaccurate.

Being a cop-turned counsellor gives me

a unique vantage point to understand both the policing and counselling profession. I remember my fellow officers commenting about never wanting to have to see a shrink, not trusting the department shrink and not wanting to be psychoanalyzed. Most officers' first (and only) encounter with a shrink is at the psychological assessment in the hiring stage or following a critical police incident so I wonder where all the "shrink" talk comes from. I also see the incredible value that counselling offers to those who are struggling. I have seen individuals who were at the brink of suicide transform their struggle into a life filled with purpose and contentment.

Some people ask why they should go to counselling if the problem they are having cannot be changed by talking about it. Yes, counselling isn't going to make management more understanding, do away with shift work and reduce issues with workplace bullying. Yet, I still say there is something that counselling can do. It can help you adjust to what you cannot change and redirect your attention to areas of your life under your control that bring you joy. Who knows? Maybe there is something

you can do about the situation that once felt impossible. It's amazing how people can come up with small ways to create change when they are given the time and space to talk through it.

Police officers are problem-solvers by nature, or at least by experience, so it seems unnecessary to ask a third party to help with a problem. It's oftentimes seen as a sign of weakness or being "less-than" in some way. Counsellors aren't there to tell people what to do. That assumes that people are feeble-minded and dependent, which doesn't help anyone feel better. Good counsellors help their clients build upon their existing strengths. If you're a good problem solver, you should expect this strength to be highlighted in your work together, not ignored.

A common tendency for many individuals, police in particular, is to avoid talking about something that is upsetting. I have heard people say that it makes things worse, not better. Sure, it's worse at the moment to talk about a painful experience than to pretend it doesn't exist but how long do you think you can avoid a painful issue without consequences? I have received MANY e-mails from cops across Canada who have expressed regret for avoiding their painful experiences. The pain caught up to them eventually and built up to a degree that was overwhelming.

I've said it time and again – running from your problems is a race you will never win. It is best to face your difficulty early with the support of a professional and your social support system. Some people push their support system away over time by coping in unhelpful ways such as abusing drugs and alcohol, withdrawing socially and verbally and physically abusing those they care about.

So, how do you know who to see? Where to start? The contact person at each agency varies. Three potential sources are your human resources department, extended health care plan provider or a peer support team member. If you want to go outside of your department, each province has a registration body for counsellors and psychologists. A simple Internet search using terms such as police, your city name and counselling can direct you to a professional in your area.

There are also non-profit organizations such as *Badge of Life Canada* that collect information about police resources, including culturally-competent (police) counsellors. Whatever challenges you face, you never have to face them alone.

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