



Let go of the outcome

My first week in field training was a mixture of excitement, pride and nervousness about my ability to be a police officer.

I was dispatched to meet a domestic abuse victim who managed to escape her home to call for help. While taking her statement I noticed the scars on her face and body, likely the remnants of previous beatings. I remember the fear and desperation in her voice as she pleaded for help with her situation.

We arrested the abuser that night and I remember thinking that this is what it is all about – righting the wrongs, protecting the vulnerable and bringing a sense of order to the world. My idealistic views were dashed a week later when I learned that the abuse victim had been beaten to death. I immediately began reviewing what I had done, not done, could've done and should've done that might have created a different outcome.

Unfortunately, this wasn't an isolated event. There were many occasions where my desire to make the world a better place just wasn't happening. Was I a bad cop? Do we chock it up to my inexperience – or was there more to it? Similar experiences were happening to every cop I knew, from rookie to veteran, so clearly it wasn't a matter of being a "good" or "bad" cop. I learned that it was the limited influence that cops actually have in the circumstances they face. So how do you do a job where you feel that your influence is limited in the big picture? You have to change your view of the picture.

If I had determined in week one that I wasn't effective in my work, there are countless instances where I would not have been able to prevent crimes, console victims and catch bad guys and gals. We have to look at those instances when we evaluate ourselves.

Unfortunately, human nature directs us to pay more attention to what went wrong than what went right. In this way, we (mistakenly) feel that we can have more control the next time we are facing a similar situation. This is not to say that we cannot learn from experiences and get better at handling events. It is to say that there is a limit to how much we can control circumstances despite our best preparation, training and wisdom.

We are human beings, after all, faced with so many variables outside of our control. Even if we do make a "mistake" in a situation, the outcome is usually greatly influenced by so many other factors than our mistake.

Take my personal example – I can reason that if I had not arrested the abuser, he would not have been so mad as to beat the victim to death. This is tricky because you can't prove it

either way, which makes this logic torturous – but I didn't beat her to death. I never even touched her. I didn't put them together as a couple and teach him that he should demonstrate his dominance by beating others to submission. In fact, what I did was what was expected of me as a police officer.

What if I hadn't arrested him and he killed her that night? Am I responsible for that too? It can feel like a no-win situation when all of the options could have negative consequences. The problem is that we assume a better outcome if we had taken a different course of action. We also discount how many times taking a certain course of action did turn out well. I arrested lots of abusers after that without this outcome.

Sometimes we also learn other information after the event and hold ourselves to a standard as if we knew it at the time. It is important to separate what we knew from what we later learned to avoid punishing ourselves for crimes we did not commit.

What I am trying to convey here through

my personal story is that we can sometimes be our own worst enemy when it comes to evaluating our decisions and performance. Attaching the outcome of an event to our input is dangerous and based upon faulty logic that we (and others) rarely question. We need to question this logic.

Did your singular input create the outcome? Did you have all the information you needed at the time? Could it have turned out poorly if you had taken a different course of action? Could a different action have made the situation even worse? Have you taken this action before without these outcomes, maybe even positive ones?

These are important questions that can not only save you a lot of grief but help you see the big picture.

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