



Less reason now to hide PTSD

Why do more officers than ever before have PTSD, someone asked me recently. I was very happy to hear the question because it's important to talk about what many may be thinking and trying to make sense of, but not talking about.

There are many reasons PTSD seems to be more prevalent today than before: 1) more help-seeking due to less stigma 2) more awareness of PTSD by practitioners 3) departments hiring older officers 4) 'Generation Y' culture entering the profession 5) more publicity on PTSD due to social media and 6) an overstimulating environment.

1) More people (including officers) are seeking help for their mental health concerns. The stigma has lessened some due to public campaigns and PTSD being likened to a physical injury, such as "operational stress injury."

I have spoken with many older officers who likely had PTSD but hid it for fear of being fired or otherwise judged. They turned to the bottle, pills or alcohol, sex, shopping or all of the above to soothe their pain. Their friends don't know they have PTSD. They see them as having a drinking or "anger problem."

Some are experiencing delayed-onset PTSD as they retire because they no longer have their work structure to keep them distracted. The risk of suicide heightens upon retirement for this reason.

2) PTSD became a diagnosis in 1980. I believe it has become better understood in recent years due to the occurrence of suicides in the military. Just this year the criteria was changed again to include emergency service personnel's chronic exposure to the trauma of others. Even stigmatized disorders, such as borderline personality disorder, are being better understood as a form of complex PTSD.

3) Departments are hiring older officers more likely to have been exposed to their own traumas, not just great life experiences. Research shows that prior trauma histories can make the officer more vulnerable to PTSD. This is complicated by the fact that older officers who have faced prior traumas may have also developed coping skills to help manage the traumas they face on the job. Some of the best cops (and therapists) have overcome difficulties in their lives, making them more hardy and compassionate in doing their job.

4) I did a study last year on older non-retiring cops and it was very clear that there was a divide between veterans and the new generation. Veterans saw the Gen Y cops as weak and lacking loyalty to the job, asking for days off for family and stress leave at the drop of a hat. I did some research on Gen Y to explain this and found that they are responding to what they saw in their parents: TOO MUCH loyalty to their employers, resulting in health problems, shock and betrayal when they were let go due to downsizing, divorce and 'latchkey' kids.

Gen Y cops are focused on their mental health, family lives and career advancement. Veteran cops do not see the knee jerk reaction their generation created in their offspring, who insist on work-life balance for the benefit of their health and, ultimately, their employer because they are more productive when happy and healthy.

5) Social media is heightening our awareness of issues such as PTSD, depression and anxiety. It seems like it's everywhere now. Social media was non-existent 20 years ago.

6) Related to #5, we are inundated with e-mails, texts, tweets, status updates, podcasts, online news, cyberbullying and Internet child porn. This has contributed to our anxiety and awareness of the ills of the world. I have clients who are quite affected by the negativity of what is being promoted out there. Cops are no exception. They see ignorant comments made by a critical public about traumatic calls they have worked.

Officers tell me they read the news about a suicide they attended and are infuriated by the comments made by readers who have no idea what they are talking about. This adds to their feelings of isolation and being misunderstood and judged by the public they serve. This is why I strongly discourage cops (and others) from reading about events they were involved in.

Positive, uplifting stories are not sexy so they rarely make the news, which can contribute to officers' sense that the world is a bad place, people are jerks and they are alone in their fight against evil. This can contribute to secondary traumatic stress, PTSD's cousin.

If you find yourself wondering about the prevalence of PTSD in the profession, or within your department, I challenge you to keep an open mind to the above points and be aware of how harmful your skepticism can be to those who suffer.

PTSD is not a sign of weakness or an excuse to get out of work but, rather, a debilitating reaction to traumatic events.

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Humber Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning
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- minimum of three years' experience
- have completed the Ontario Police College (OPC) training or equivalent, such as the Regular Force MP QL3 course or MPOC
- have worked to gain community experience

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- have worked to gain community experience

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For more information, contact Police Leadership Liaison: Stephen.Duggan@humber.ca or at 416.675.6622 ext. 3771

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