

A LINE ON LIFE

1/16/94

Police Families and Stress *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

When violent crimes are blurted out in the news, most of us express concern for the victims and their families. However, few of us consider the police officers who deal with this violence – or the families of these officers. This was a topic of an international conference at the FBI Academy at Quantico, Virginia, last July. In the words of one police psychologist, Ellen Scrivner –

"As a support system, family members are critical to a police officer, but in many instances they are affected by the work. They don't carry the badge or the gun, but very often they feel the responsibility of that."

Many officers distance themselves from their families, when they are under stress. However, according to Greg Riede, psychological services director for the Houston PD, the responses of the officers differ as they progress in their careers. At first, officers see everything from a very personal perspective. When they see women and children harmed, it reminds them of the vulnerability of their own families. Further in their career, they are more likely to cope by desensitizing themselves, joking about events that would seem horrifying or tragic to the average person. Riede gave an example of this behavior.

"We had an incident where a guy jumped off a building and died. A cop came up, lifted (the dead man's) limp hand and looked at his watch and said, 'Still ticking.'"

To protect themselves, often officers desensitize themselves to their families too. They isolate themselves from family members, becoming cold and aloof. According to Riede, officers can learn to become more concerned and caring with their loved ones.

When stress occurs in an officer's job, most officers are not aware of the effects it has on their families. These officers – usually men – establish an emotional distance between themselves and their families. When they are injured or have a "close call," they hesitate to reveal their feelings. According to Eloise Archibald, director of psychological services for the NYPD, the officers are worried about frightening their loved ones.

"They're afraid those loved ones will become upset and afraid. The fact is, the loved one is upset and afraid anyway. The spouse complains, 'He's not talking to me.'"

"We try to get across that, as a cop, if you have no reason to think that you loved one doesn't want to know what is on your mind, there's no reason not to talk."

In Washington, DC in 1988, a police officer shot and killed his partner, when the partner stepped in front of the suspect he was trying to shoot. The shooter tortured himself with feelings of guilt.

"Initially, the impact of the accident was overwhelming.... In my case, I hated myself."

With this self-hate, the lives of his wife and three children were severely affected. His wife was ready to give up.

"At one point, I was set to throw him out completely. He just didn't know what was going on, or where he was. He had lost all confidence in himself. I didn't know how to handle it."

With psychological intervention, the officer gradually realized that – as uncomfortable as they were – his feelings were normal. In addition, his wife was made aware of the variety of reactions that he might have. Although this did not solve their problem, it did reduce its severity. One psychologist sees other advantages of making the spouse more aware.

"The spouse is empowered with some information to kind of monitor the well-being of the officer. And I think it betters the relationship of couples by having shared a difficult experience."

In Los Angeles County in 1993, The Sheriff's Office considered family counseling as a top priority. The department had a staff of 13 to provide family crisis outreach. However, with budget cuts, the staff has been slashed to five. With the reduction, the primary tasks became screening of recruits and employee relations. Now officers and their spouses are on waiting lists – with the officers receiving priority.

However, the Yuma PD has a contract with Sonora Vista for an Employee Assistance Program. Through this program, police officers and other Yuma PD employees – and their spouses – can receive confidential counseling for various crisis situations.

* Adapted from Scott Sleek's "Stress of critical events affects officers, families," [*APA Monitor*](#), December, 1993, pages 29-30.