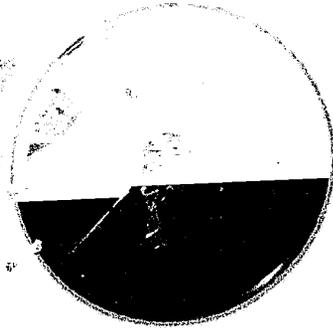
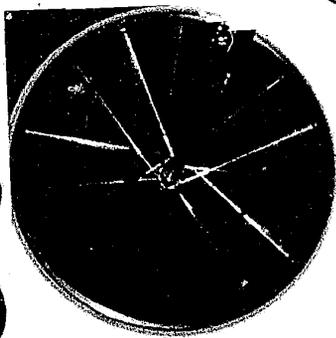




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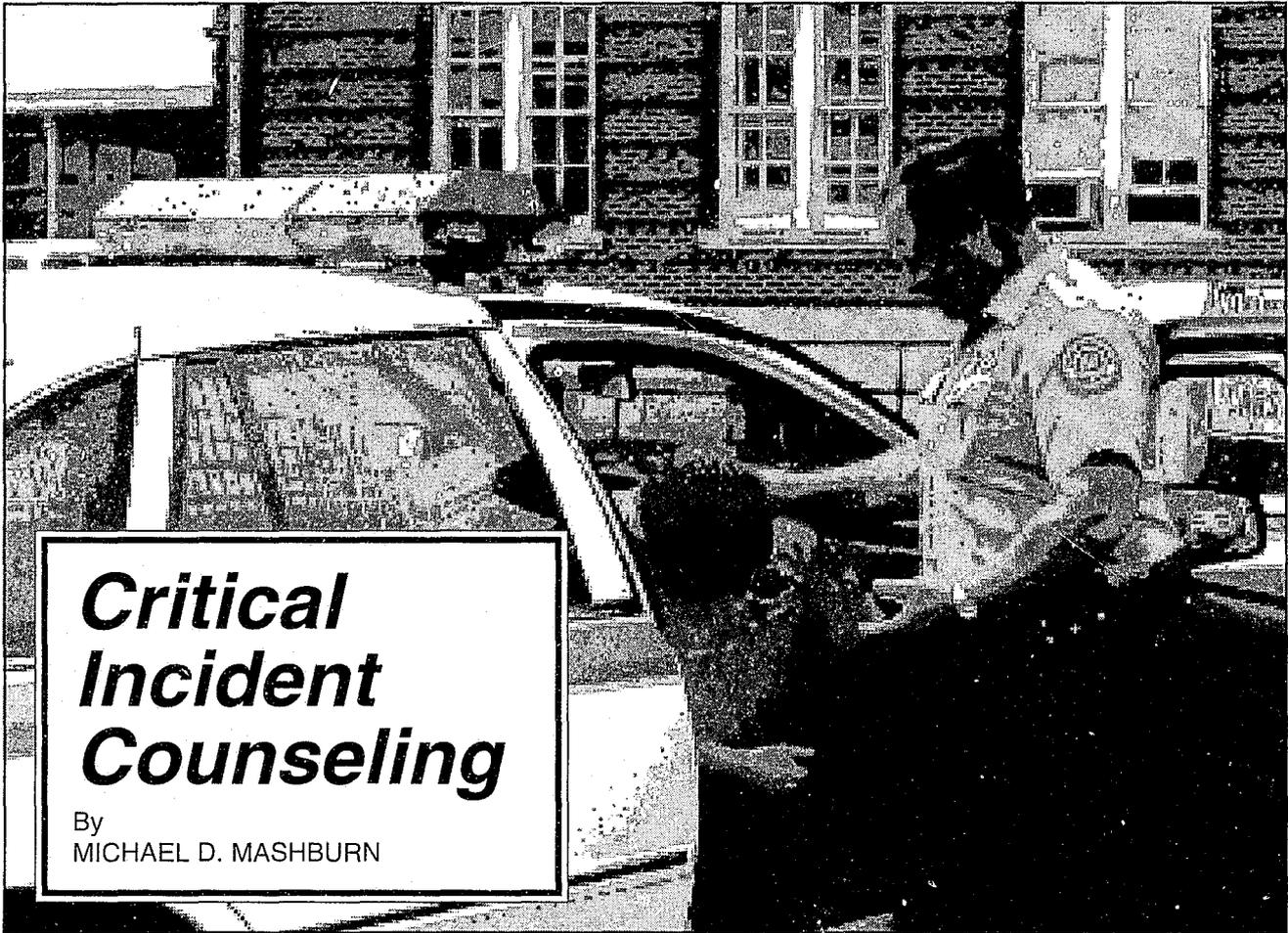
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Critical Incident Counseling

By
MICHAEL D. MASHBURN

Many law enforcement administrators fail to recognize the importance of employee assistance programs until a critical incident, such as a shooting or an officer suicide, forces them to consider specific programs for reducing employee stress. Only then do many managers see, firsthand, the need for some type of support system for officers.

For example, when an officer of the Jonesboro, Arkansas, Police Department was found on the police firing range—dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound—no formal support system existed to help other officers in the department deal with

the tragic incident. The deceased officer's act of desperation could possibly have set off several time bombs—emotional maladies that might surface later in the lives of other officers in the department.

Fortunately, some of the officers who were close to the deceased were able to form an informal support group. Meeting with other officers allowed them to discuss their feelings and vent their frustrations among a group of colleagues who understood perfectly the pitfalls of the law enforcement profession.

As department members attempted to deal with the officer's

suicide, administrators realized that they needed to take a firmer position on reducing employee stress. As a result, they began to seek ways to help officers cope not only with the stress of critical incidents but also with the stresses of everyday life.

Unfortunately, the oversight of the Jonesboro Police Department with respect to critical incident counseling is not an uncommon occurrence in law enforcement. The law enforcement community has been rather slow to accept the fact that critical incident stress can seriously affect police officers in both their work and their private lives.¹

This article examines possible cost-effective steps that small departments can take to address the problem of stress within police agencies. It discusses how agency administrators can use inservice training classes to examine what causes stress within their departments, as well as effective ways to deal with the problem. Finally, it suggests possible economical avenues administrators can pursue to provide assistance to officers suffering from anxiety and other post-traumatic incident disorders.

INSERVICE TRAINING

Police administrators need to take a proactive approach when dealing with stress within their departments. They sometimes only get involved when they need to cure a problem, rather than attempting to prevent the problem.

Administrators can begin by instituting inservice training classes that better enable the officers to deal

with post-traumatic stress when it occurs. While administrators cannot control all of life's events or the nature of criminal activity that turns to violence, they can take steps to educate officers to deal with them when they do arise.

The initial inservice training class on stress should emphasize the benefits of psychological services, whether these services are provided by fellow officers or by trained professionals. It is important that officers understand that counseling can help them to deal more effectively with certain life events. They must also accept the fact that receiving such help does not belittle or stigmatize them—it is not a reflection on their ability to deal with problems. When officers realize that other colleagues experience the same types of problems, they will be encouraged to openly share their feelings with their peers.²

The initial training should also familiarize officers with any depart-

ment policies that require them to seek professional help in coping with post-traumatic stress disorders. To do this, however, police administrators must develop a policy that dictates how that care will be provided and who will bear the costs of a mental health professional, if one is required.

Through inservice classes, administrators can also prepare officers to support their colleagues who suffer from critical incident stress. Proper training in this area ensures that officers have the support of the department during these incidents. For example, both street officers and supervisors should know how to react at the scene of a traumatic incident and how they can offer reassurance to the officers involved. They should be trained to reduce, not increase, the officers' stress levels. They can accomplish this by distancing the involved officers from the scene. This prevents citizens and the media from confronting the involved officers until they can regain their composure.

Officers should also learn how to interact on a personal level with fellow officers involved in critical incidents. They should make only reassuring and supportive comments to the officers, and they should refrain from making glib or off-colored remarks about the event. Just their presence can offer valuable emotional support.

Furthermore, officers should learn to refrain from making humorous remarks to the involved officer. Humor does not necessarily relieve anxiety. Officers should also refrain from making judgment statements to these individuals. Instead, they should listen to their colleagues and



Captain Mashburn commands the Patrol Division of the Jonesboro, Arkansas, Police Department.

“
Officers should not feel that they must deal with stress or critical incidents alone.
”

express concern about their well-being.³ Sympathy and understanding go a long way in helping officers to deal with the situation.

METHODS OF SUPPORT

Although inservice training classes can help officers to learn how to cope with the stress caused by critical incidents, departments must also offer some form of extended, organized system for support. While many police agencies cannot afford the expense of retaining the services of a mental health professional, cost-effective means of providing officer support do exist. For example, police administrators can institute internal peer counseling teams or call upon ministers or priests to serve as volunteer counselors.

Internal Peer Counseling Teams

Peer counseling teams can help officers to deal with critical incidents that do not require a debriefing session with a psychologist, such as arguments with spouses, financial matters, or other minor causes of stress. While this process quite possibly already exists within the department in an unofficial manner, the methodology has to be refined to ensure that it occurs in a more efficient, organized, and beneficial manner.

A firm basis exists for implementing peer counseling teams, especially in law enforcement. The very nature of the job makes officers highly suspicious of individuals outside their inner circle. However, officials should address several areas before creating a peer counseling team. In fact, the success of the team may very well depend on the

careful selection of team members and a balance in the rank makeup of the group.

Selecting team members

No one better understands the problems of a police officer than another officer.⁴ Internal peer counseling teams allow officers to receive help from individuals who understand what the law enforcement occupation encompasses.

“

No one better understands the problems of a police officer than another officer.

”

However, officials should take great care when selecting officers for the peer counseling team. While the size of the department should dictate the size of the team, the composition of the team should depend on how comfortably officers in the department interact with one another with respect to rank. Administrators must decide whether ranking officers alone should serve on the team, whether the team should be a mixture of ranking officers and patrol officers, or whether only patrol officers should serve on the team.

It may also help if team members have experienced difficult times in their careers or private lives, thus giving them a greater capacity for empathy.⁵ In other words, those who have already

weathered personal battles may be better able to understand how officers in crisis feel.

Training team members

Officers chosen to participate as team members should receive additional training on stress management and counseling. They should learn to act only as sounding boards for the officers by listening sympathetically to their perceptions of what occurred. And, although they should not attempt to act as psychoanalysts, they must be trained to recognize greater, deep-seated problems that may require referrals to qualified therapists. The peer group should realize that it is not capable of handling every situation it encounters.

Members of the peer counseling team should also receive training in an often overlooked aspect of critical incident stress training—officers who witness critical incidents. Officers who witness a shooting incident or a similar traumatic event involving another member of the department may experience the same post-traumatic stress as the involved officer, which requires that they also receive counseling.

Finally, members of the peer counseling team should receive instruction on how to counsel the families of officers involved in critical incidents. Peer counselors can provide further support to affected officers by working with their families. Concerned relatives may have questions about how the incident will affect not only the life of the involved officer but also other family members.

Family members are well aware that critical incidents can affect

officers both administratively and emotionally, placing added pressure on their home lives. However, families can provide great support to officers during critical times. Having this added base of support can impact on how officers survive critical incidents.

As in the case of general stress training, the majority of this training can be given during inservice classes. However, because these training sessions concentrate on how to counsel officers, department officials should contract with mental health professionals to lead these particular classes.

Local Clergy

Another cost-effective way to deal with stress among police officers is to call upon area ministers and priests as volunteer counselors. Generally, these volunteers work on a case-by-case basis and remain on call at all times. This provides employees with a counselor during critical times or when employees simply feel unusual stress in their lives.

As professionally trained counselors, the local clergy can also assist department officials by lecturing at various inservice classes. Using these trained volunteers reduces the need to bring in highly paid mental health professionals.

CONCLUSION

Nothing is more frustrating to street officers than the belief that they are working on their own, without the support of their administrators. They may already feel a lack of public support, believing that their endeavors either go unnoticed or are unfairly scrutinized.

Approximately 70 percent of officers involved in shootings leave their police departments within 5 years.⁶ This results in the loss of valuable employees. Sadly, some of these employees may not have been lost had adequate stress training and counseling services existed. Proper training and counseling services give employees an awareness that administrators are concerned about their welfare during both critical incidents and private crises.

Officers need to have adequate counseling services available to them, and they need adequate training in what to expect in the area of critical incident stress. Adequate, accurate, and realistic training make expectations and realities more compatible.⁷

Officers should not feel that they must deal with stress or critical incidents alone. Instead, they must be firm in the belief that they will have the support of the department, their peers, and their families. ♦

Endnotes

¹ Tom Pierson, "Critical Incident Stress: A Serious Law Enforcement Problem," *The Police Chief*, February 1989, 33.

² *Ibid.*, 32.

³ *Training Key #385* (Gaithersburg, Maryland: International Association of Chiefs of Police, 1988).

⁴ Robin Klein, "The Utilization of Police Peer Counselors in Critical Incidents," *Critical Incidents in Policing* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), 160.

⁵ Eugene Kennedy, *Crisis Counseling* (New York, New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1984), 18.

⁶ Class lecture by Special Agent James Horn, FBI Academy, Quantico, Virginia, 1992.

⁷ James T. Reese, "Critical Incidents, Now There's Help," *Behavioral Science in Law Enforcement*, (Quantico, Virginia: U.S. Government, FBI Academy), 64.

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