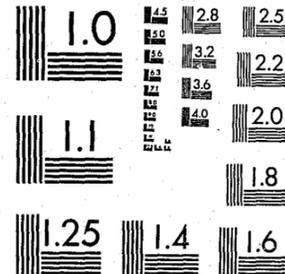


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ATF'S National Response Teams

The Cost of "Coming Out on Top"

Emotional Responses to Surviving the Deadly Battle



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There have been many recent publications regarding "officer survival," including everything from short articles in newsletters and professional journals to hardbound books. These publications have focused on identifying risks from physical assault and developing tactics for responding to such threats. These techniques are vital to the welfare of all law enforcement officers, and every officer should be provided with this information. However, the risk of physical assault is not the greatest threat to the well-being of law enforcement officers. More police officers are victims of cardiovascular disease, traffic accidents, and suicides than are killed by physical assaults. There is even a risk to the officers who survive physical assaults, especially if



Dr. Lippert



Chief Ferrara

the officer uses deadly force in responding to the threat. Such officers frequently face strong emotional and psychological reactions which can inhibit their ability to cope with their job, family, and life in general.

The FBI has, for many years, compiled information concerning law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty. There is little statistical information regarding officers who kill in the line of duty, either in efforts to apprehend criminals or while defending themselves or others. However, based on the limited information available, it is apparent that these officers face a very real threat—the emotional and psychological reactions to taking a human life. The variety of reactions and responses to the phenomenon of stress are as varied in police as in the general population. Policemen do have certain characteristics which reflect their needs and desire to enter law enforcement. In general, their initial response and feelings toward their work and people they work with—be it the criminal, the public, or their peer group—is essentially the same as the general population. However, the differences are important as shown on the Study of Values Test by Allport and Vernon.¹ Research indicated that in the first year of work as a rookie on the streets, the two highest values present were those of *social service*—that is, working with people—and *religion* or moral concepts. Most persons involved in police work have a high moral code and a strong concept of right and wrong. It is interesting that 5 years later, when given the same Study of Values Test by Allport and Vernon, the value system

had markedly changed. The social service scale had dropped dramatically, the economics scale had risen dramatically, and the political scale had increased significantly. The religious scale remained essentially the same. This fairly steady scale of religion becomes significant, especially in fatal shooting incidents, when moral values come to bear.

In a major midwestern police department, it is mandatory that every policeman involved in a shooting incident, fatal or nonfatal, be seen by a psychologist or psychiatrist to assist in stress management. A requirement of this nature is necessary since policemen are quite uneasy about seeking psychological advice and counseling. They believe it reflects on their overall sense of masculinity and sense of self-sufficiency. Police officers also hold the basic suspicion that no one really cares. Outside of their peers, people simply treat them as a curiosity. There is some support for these beliefs. Persons in many different professions attach themselves to police officers and their work in order to share the excitement and action without accepting any responsibility. Another factor affecting the policeman's ability to deal with a psychologist is that officers are essentially very concrete, reality-oriented persons. In dealing with psychological needs, we are in a world of abstracts.

The response of a policeman when he kills a person varies. In some cases, the individual experiences incredible guilt, feels immobilized, believes that in some way he has attacked basic humanity-type goals, or that he has even compromised his religion. The other extreme is the individual who experiences absolutely no guilt and who frankly says, "Doc, is it all right if I don't feel guilty? If I had another gun, I would have shot him six more times." It is interesting that the variety of responses to the fatal shootings appears to be correlated with the amount of possible threat or actual bodily injury done to the police officer himself. For example, the policeman who shoots somebody in protection of his partner has reacted to a threat

quite distant from his own body. He believes he has a responsibility to protect another person, but he feels more guilty. He is taking a man's life to save someone else, not himself. Also, there is sometimes anger in that the officer believes his buddy may have set himself up for it. For example, in one case, a chase occurred. When the car crashed without major damage, two policemen jumped from their cars and walked straight toward the front of the station wagon. When the criminal in the station wagon began to drive toward the two approaching policemen, a third policeman shot the driver. The officer who did the shooting believed he had reacted as he had been trained. He had been trained to remain behind his car door until all factors were secured. This policeman believed he was forced to shoot the driver because his fellow officers were exposed to danger. Had they remained in a secure position, the shooting may not have been necessary. Therefore, this officer's anger was directed at both his partners and the situation itself.

Another case involved an undercover policeman dressed in civilian clothes. As he neared his car in a high-crime area, he was approached by another man who had been drinking and was trying to find someone to fight. This particular policeman was a large-sized, big-boned individual, who might appear to be the "biggest man in town." In any event, the subject approached the policeman and immediately stuck a gun to his head. He used various vilifications and threatened the policeman, who was slowly edging himself to a gun lying on his car seat. The policeman managed to grab the gun on the car seat and shot the man six times. As the criminal fell to the ground, he shot and wounded the policeman in the shoulder, resulting in his being hospitalized. The policeman was off duty for approximately 1 year because of treatment difficulties with his shoulder and arm. When the officer was seen in the hospital 3 days after the incident, he frankly stated that he did not have guilt feelings, and given the opportunity, he would have shot the criminal several more times.

While the effects of a shooting are varied among police officers, interviews with officers who have experienced such incidents indicated a definite pattern of reaction. It is important that an officer understand that these reactions are normal and should not be considered as signs of weakness or emotional instability—these reactions will occur in most officers. The best hope of minimizing the effects of these responses is to understand what they are and why they occur. The officer should be better prepared to manage his own reactions.

Pattern of Reaction

Denial—Initially, the policeman does not believe the incident occurred. He stands over the body in disbelief, with shotgun or pistol in hand. This reaction is the normal response of an individual having experienced an event which demands immediate decision-making, with immediate results apparent. The individual has not consolidated the entire event in his thinking system, and there is momentary psychological shock. The activity has required the use of reflexive behavior rather than a step-by-step thinking process. This disbelief or denial subsides rather quickly as the policeman becomes aware of a dead body in front of him or a wounded subject needing help.

Gathering facts—The policeman realizes immediately that he needs to present all the facts relating to the sequence of events and must justify the shooting. He is also beginning to prepare himself for what he knows will be an investigation by the homicide

squad, internal investigation, and/or the administration. Policemen are trained to think in very factual terms when reporting incidents. That is exactly what he is doing. He is examining his position to determine whether he had acted according to his training. At this time it is probably not useful for a psychologist to speak to the policeman in that he is at a very concrete level. He is concerned with his professional position and is not willing to deal with his emotions.

Reporting facts—The policeman presents the facts to the investigators, hoping for support and vindications. If he receives this support, he becomes less defensive.

Up to this point, the policeman is acting according to his training. Fact-gathering and reporting incidents are daily tasks for a police officer. The stages he enters next are beyond his training and are frequently psychologically threatening. It is at this point that the policeman is in need of stress management. He should be aware that he will enter the following stages and should be assured of the normality of his response.

Physical anxiousness—The officer is experiencing a high amount of stress even if he has been reassured that everything is all right. His body continues to respond with high activity—he is experiencing a fight/flight response. Having fought to save his life through shooting another person, he is now beginning to experience a flight-type response. He would like to get away from the situation and find some way to "shut down" and find relief. He finds himself unable to relax and wonders whether there is something physically wrong with him. The physically anxious feeling causing the inability to sleep, frequent pacing, and the inability to sit still is quite normal. All policemen involved in shooting incidents should, within 24 hours, engage in some type

of physical activity. Depending on their lifestyle, this could be sedentary things, such as fishing, or active exercise, such as playing baseball or racquetball. This activity relieves the anxiety, tension, and continued state of preparedness in which the physical body of the policeman remains.



Peer group support—A significant phenomenon is that every policeman interviewed was, within 48 hours, back at the station to speak with his fellow officers. He was obviously seeking peer reassurance. Some departments give the policeman 2 or 3 days off; yet, he insists on going back to the station to speak with his peers. It is believed that this return to the station is necessary and healthy in that it reassures the officer that despite his having taken someone's life, there are those who support his behavior.

Moral self-questioning—After 2 or 3 days, things slow down. The policeman begins to think of the moral implications of his behavior. Within a few days, the very strong value systems possessed by most police officers affect dramatically his evaluation of himself as a human being. It is at this particular point a psychologist can be most helpful. The policeman is questioning his values. This questioning is quite normal and very important. The reassurance and support the policeman receives from the psychologist enables him to see his behavior in rational terms, giving him a great deal of relief. He finds that his response to the events of the past few days have been normal, typical, and usually quite healthy. If the policeman has not received some training in stress management, he begins to believe that there is something drastically wrong with him. Besides experiencing moral anxiety, he is beginning to become concerned with his psychological state; he wonders whether he is going to "lose it." He finds that he is unable to speak with anybody about these problems and does not know how to broach the subject. The situation gets rapidly out of hand, and as some policemen who have not had posttraumatic shooting-incident counseling have expressed, they have died a "thousand deaths" since the shooting. They continue to have nightmares about the incident and continually expect some sort of high-level punishment of a religious nature. Their peers, who deal with many of the same type of events, are frequently unavailable. The macho image of policemen does not often encourage mutual, emotional sharing. A police officer who has experienced a fatal shooting incident unfortunately will not easily share his feelings. He fears that his shield of defense will be penetrated, and it will be obvious that he is vulnerable and unsure of himself. Officers who have not experienced a fatal shooting incident usually remark in a "John Wayne"-type statement that the policeman was macho in having the gunfight. The officer also finds that he is unable to speak to his wife or family.

They may be supportive of him; yet for him, they do not form the solid framework of peer group relationships. They are not policemen, and he assumes they cannot understand. The policeman, thus, is rapidly excluding important persons, bringing about his own isolation, and quite possibly, ultimate immobilization.

Counseling

The most effective way to get a policeman into a counseling, stress management-type session after such an incident is to establish a policy making such counseling mandatory. By making it mandatory, the decision-making responsibility is immediately taken from the policeman, who is in the midst of stress already. Although there may be momentary resistance toward such an order, it is up to the psychologist to bring relief to the policeman. The result is usually the appreciation of the officer for having had such a counseling session.

The first session is conducted with only the officer, who is immediately assured of total confidentiality. No information is given to other people. Because the officer is being investigated by his department, the psychologist could easily be seen as another inquiring force who may well give retribution if things have not been done according to department policy.

In all incidents, an attempt is made to have the policeman come back for a second session that includes his wife. Again, there is hesitation by the policeman, who does not really want to involve his wife. The fact is his wife is already involved. More than any other profession, the wife lives vicariously through police work. Her husband's



behavior is reported in rather ghastly detail by the media, and the events surrounding the incident are usually made even more frightening by graphic press descriptions. The immediate concern of the psychologist is that the policeman's wife has not been openly confronted with the possibility her husband may be killed. It is quite typical for a policeman's wife to attempt to persuade her husband to transfer to a different kind of police work or even encourage him to get out of police work entirely. Now he has not only the stress of the incident, his own psychological stress, and moral anxiety but also the concern of his wife and family. Thus, the policeman is being presented with incredible responsibility and decisionmaking—a decisionmaking process for which he has probably not been trained. When a wife is brought in, she is initially quite anxious that she may reflect poorly on her husband. As

she relaxes, she often speaks openly of her anxieties and the couple becomes mutually supportive. In any kind of psychological work, one of the primary goals is to widen the individual's support system, the most vital of which is his family.

The policeman and his wife are then given the option of attending future sessions. If it is believed that further support is needed, very strong encouragement is given to the officer and his wife to return. Some seventy percent of all persons involved in such programs have returned for advice, not only on police-related matters but also for other personal problems. It is also significant that this group of policemen have been very active in referring other policemen to the psychologist.

There is no question that serious psychological events do occur following a shooting incident, or that stress management within 3 or 4 days following a shooting incident is effective in building psychological and physical stability within the policeman. It is strongly advised that police departments that can afford this kind of service will find ample return in police stability and avoidance of unnecessary anxiety or self-recrimination. There is also an increased sense of morale—the policeman believes that he is important to the department. If the department cannot afford such a service, contact should be made with the local psychological association at the city, county, or State level, asking for possible volunteers to provide this service. Many psychologists have a wish to help the community, and they do not necessarily demand financial compensation for every service. In almost every community there are psychologists who have been in practice for many years, are financially secure, and believe they have an obligation to support the community in various ways without compensation. They are untapped resources for the wise police agencies—find them and use them.

FBI

Footnote

Allport, Vernon, and Lindzey, *The Study of Values*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960).

END