

# The Value of Peer Support

*By Rich Elias*

All too often in the law enforcement arena, emotional survival issues claim more victims than safety-related issues. The negative effects of unchecked cumulative stress and trauma are due in large part to the lack of self awareness and knowledge on how to develop effective and healthy coping strategies. This lack of awareness, coupled with personal and family stress, can sometimes be a recipe for disaster. Although wellness programs, including Employee Assistance Programs (EAP's) are available within most law enforcement agencies, at the end of the day, officers need to be reminded that they can seek the help they need without being stigmatized or viewed as "unfit for duty." Only within the past couple of decades have law enforcement agencies begun to take proactive and preventative measures to combat the stress inherent in the profession. Because of the above issues, a critical incident stress management program (CISM), which includes a strong peer support component, is needed.

In law enforcement, almost all of our officer safety-related training programs are designed to train officers how to think and act tactically, and how to fight using the tools of their trade within the guidelines of the law and their respective departmental policies. Officers are trained and oftentimes are called upon to make split second decisions during the intense, ever-changing heat of battles—decisions that can, and probably will, impact them for the rest of their lives. With the growth of reality based training and technological advances, law enforcement officers are prepared and conditioned for battle like never before. Despite this good news, the reality is that the stress of the job or the horror of a particular incident, such as an officer-involved shooting, can wear them down, no matter how trained, conditioned, and experienced they are.

I believe there is a momentous shift that is taking place nationwide in the culture of law enforcement—a culture that has historically held the belief of: "We are strong, never weak" and "We solve the problem; we're not the problem." With nowhere to go, many officers find unhealthy ways to mask their stress before their downward spiral eventually hits rock bottom. The goal of this article is to encourage law enforcement agencies to develop wellness programs designed to promote the well being of all staff. The first step to prevention is education and training. Officers need to know up front the stressful nature of the career they have chosen, and they need to be reminded of it throughout their careers. This awareness, coupled with the guidance of wellness programs, will enable officers to take proactive steps to prepare for when stress builds or trauma comes knocking. Then ultimately, it is the responsibility of each individual officer to maintain their emotional well being by seeking healthy versus non-healthy coping strategies. As a bottom line, a healthy person is generally a more productive employee, spouse, parent and citizen.

Only since the 1980's has awareness developed regarding the effects of trauma on first responders. Many times, exposure to critical incidents leads to psychological trauma and post-traumatic stress. When law enforcement officers and first responders suffer from

mental anguish, they are more likely to experience substance abuse, divorce, significant anger management issues, suicidal ideation, and other negative behaviors. Law enforcement agencies are realizing their officers are human and that it is alright to show emotion over certain situations. For too long, the law enforcement culture has embraced the motto of: “Get up, dust yourself off, and get back to work.”

I believe that peer support is the backbone of a CISM program. Simply put, peer support is “stress management.” Peer support is defined by the reality that people who encounter similar experiences are in a better position to understand the psychological and emotional toll inherent in the profession. Peer support gives officers the opportunity to speak in confidence to someone who experiences the same job stressors, without fear of being stigmatized, losing their jobs, or stalling their career growth. Stressors can include, but are not limited to, dangerousness of the job, witnessing of human suffering, shift work, paperwork, organizational stress (politics), family or financial stress.

Although trained in individual and group crisis intervention techniques, peers are not mental health professionals, and thus, no official record is kept of individuals who use the Peer Support Program. Trained peers can also conduct group sessions for officers and others involved in a critical incident. Having a large pool of trained peer supporters throughout the various levels of the agency will maximize the program’s ability to identify and mitigate problems when they arise and before they spiral out of control. Peer programs, as a result, are proactive in nature, and designed to mitigate the continual, unchecked stress, that leads to a critical incident.

Peer supporters are trained to assess an individual’s ability to cope with stress through active listening and intervention strategies. If the level of stress goes beyond any of these techniques, the peer supporter will recommend and/or facilitate advanced professional care. Furthermore, peer supporters can alleviate some of the stressors by taking care of basic and family needs in order to lessen the stressful effects of the incident.

In conclusion, in order for a Peer Support Program to be effective, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of having support from all levels of the organization and having the right people in place. Managers must communicate their support by either becoming team members or by consistently communicating to their staff the importance of reaching out for help when needed. The bottom line: in order to change a culture that historically has believed that asking for help is a sign of weakness, managers must make it safe for all staff to access programs. I strongly believe that when officers feel comfortable asking for help, they will take a more proactive approach in regards to their emotional well-being. In the end, the investment will be well worth it.

If you are committed to establishing a peer program, the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF) is but one example of a credible training organization. For more information, visit them at [www.icisf.org](http://www.icisf.org).