

Police Suicide

Name It, Tame It: The Elephant in the Department

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Abstract

Shrouded in a dark and seemingly tangled web of silence and secrecy, the police culture is problematic and misunderstood to many considered outsiders. A culture constructed of shared values and common ideals, creates a unique bond of solidarity and trust between the men and women in blue, cemented by silence. Oftentimes, such silence is warranted when securing evidentiary information, protecting crime victims, and shielding officers from unwarranted public scrutiny. However, the flip side remains that issues concerning officer safety and wellness are also tangled in this web. One such secret concerns the number one killer of police officers – suicide. To prevent officer suicide, we must ACT— (A) acknowledge, (C) communicate, and (T) train officers on the hazards of the job. This article explores this secretive topic to help us begin to understand how the culture of silence perpetuates suicide as the predominant cop killer. The article is an attempt to unveil the elephant in the department.

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When there's an elephant in the room introduce him.

Randy Pausch - The Last Lecture

Officers remain aware of the dangers involved in their work, in terms of losing their lives to an assailant, being killed during a vehicle pursuit or traffic accident, or to a lack of care and concern for their own well-being. Though these are all tragic ends to often bright careers, what remains even more tragic is the lack of training and education on a topic claiming more lives each year – officer suicide. According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)(2010) of all suicide deaths approximately 90% of these individuals suffered from a psychiatric illness which was diagnosable and treatable. —The intensity of silence is thus affected not only by the number of people who conspire to maintain it but also by the length of time they manage to do so (Zerubavel, 2006, p. 58).

There is no time like the present in which to introduce the elephant in the department, possibly in your department. The elephant's name – *Officer Suicide*. The sooner we name the elephant, the sooner we can tame it. We can no longer afford to hide behind the badge or the ever-popular “Code of Silence” when dealing with this sensitive and deadly topic. Time spent avoiding the topic and debating over numbers does not save lives, and I am sure we all agree that one suicide is one too many.

Let's put aside our differences about whether suicide is the first or second leading cause of death for law enforcement officers. Let us stop hiding behind the badge and start preparing officers for the demons they will face. After all, Jamison (1999) explained:

[M]ethods of suicide are far from being just a sideshow of freakish death; they give testament, instead, to the desperation and determination of the suicidal mind. They evoke horror, certainly, but they also give us a glimpse into otherwise unimaginable misery. (p. 135)

The unimaginable misery witnessed by individuals ultimately contemplating suicide must be recognized for what it is “... a final gathering of unknown motives, complex psychologies, and uncertain circumstance...” (Jamison, 1999, p. 26). Suicide in and of itself is not unique; rather suicide is about the individuality of the act and the circumstances surrounding the ultimate decision to end one's own existence. We cannot bring back those who have chosen to end their existence. We can and must work diligently to save those who currently suffer and will suffer from such unimaginable miseries before they seal their own fate.

Imagine for a moment that you are that desperate officer who is suffering silently from an unimaginable set of circumstances. You just found out your spouse is having an affair and intends to leave you and take your children. Coupled with the fact you will now be alone for the holidays

and were just passed up for a promotion to sergeant. Going to work seems unimaginable in light of these circumstances and inattentiveness leads to rookie mistakes. The major chip on your shoulder has resulted in several citizen complaints, as well as a cold shoulder from your crew. Sure, no one knows exactly what you are going through, but how could they, if your strategy is jumping down their throats every time they ask the question: is everything OK? More time is spent at work to avoid family issues. When off-duty, time is spent at the local bar with a fellow officer drinking and sobbing over your current situation. In the meantime, you have been written up twice this week for coming in late and your appearance has much to be desired. The shift sergeant hinted that there appears to be remnants of alcohol on your breath after a late night bender and has asked another officer to provide you an escort home.

Arriving home to an empty house, feelings of pure desperation leave you spiraling deeper and deeper out of control. With Isolation taking its toll, the excessive drinking only fuels the flames. Focus on anything is nearly impossible. The little focus and energy remaining is centered on the affair your wife is having and the dirtball destroying your family. Risking life and limb to keep those you serve and love safe are a testament of your dedication to them and the profession. How dare he do this to you and your family?

You eventually collect yourself enough to get ready for work, but the pain and frustration become more apparent as the Chief calls you in for a talk. In light of your recent actions and flying off the handle at the Chief, you land a three day suspension. Unable to explain to the Chief what is going on; after all, he could care less. Right?

Does this sound familiar? Have you been in a similar situation? Are fellow officers facing these difficult situations? Sure it may not be exactly the same but what about money problems, drug and alcohol abuse, terminal illness, death of a loved one; do you share these concerns with your peers? Seemingly everyday issues arise without notice, coupled with relationship issues or problems at work can seem unimaginable, even hopeless.

So where can you turn? And why does it seem so difficult to resolve your personal issues? You spend anywhere from eight to 12 hours a day helping others resolve their problems. Could it stem from a feeling that you always get your way, and when you don't get your way you do not know how to act or react? Compliance is demanded of everyone and anything less is unacceptable. So what happens at home when a power struggle exists between you and your teenager who believes he or she is old enough to date, stay out past curfew, or take the family car without permission? And let's not forget your spouse or significant others. What happens when there is a disagreement over something trivial and neither side will budge?

Has your spouse ever been non-compliant to your demands? Do you solve issues of non-compliance by talking or do you revert to intimidation and force? After all, it is reported that police families experience incidents of domestic violence at a rate of 2 to 4 times that of the general population (Brannan, 2001).

Officers are problem-solvers by nature, but underestimating the availability of tools and resources in the way of training and education, coupled with an overestimation of the emotional well-being of officers could be deadly. So, why are officers so afraid to seek assistance?

The fear of seeking assistance often stems from a fear of disclosure, a fear of rejection and a fear of losing the law enforcement identity (Douglas, 1997). Officers are provided numerous tools and resources to protect their lives and the lives of those they swore to serve and protect. No one would fathom putting an officer on the street without the proper tools and training (i.e., academy training, weapon, vest, car, radio, etc.), all of which make the officer's job simpler, more effective, and most of all safer. Not only would it be irresponsible, but negligent to fail to provide the tools necessary for officers to effectively do their job, in-turn, increasing the risk of officers and departments being sued. "[I]nstructors have a moral and legal obligation to constantly research methods to enhance training and, ultimately, the survival of their students" (Siddle, 1995, p. 12). We cannot research, nor train on what we do not acknowledge to be a legitimate issue facing law enforcement.

Suicide remains a leading cause of officer death and without the proper tools, training, and education; departments are left dealing with liability issues when a negligent failure to train is apparent. Such negligence could not be more apparent than in the lack of available training and education on the topic of police suicide awareness (PSA). According to Robert Douglas, Director of the National Police Suicide Foundation, less than 2% of all police departments nationwide provide any type of police suicide awareness [PSA] training (National Police Suicide Foundation [PSF], 2008). The lack of training only reiterates to officers there is no problem, forcing officers to deal with difficult issues in maladaptive ways (Johnson, 2011). Furthermore, agencies lose valuable governmental funding for PSA types of training and risk being sued by the families of officers who ended their own existence due to a lack of proper and appropriate training.

In order to break the silence we must introduce the elephant in the department [name it], but we must introduce him publicly [tame it]. "Acknowledging the elephant's presence in private is unlikely to end a conspiracy of silence" (Zerubavel, 2006, p. 62). An officer suicide plays a particularly significant role in the lives of the officers left behind. The unexpected death of an officer leaves many unanswered questions, ultimately forcing surviving officers to ponder their own mortality (Henry, 2004). This is due in part to the significance officers and administrators place on law enforcement culture and the ability of all members to maintain silence. The secretive culture entangles its members in a web of silence, initially shielding them from the daily devastation the officers witness, ultimately leading to a mutual understanding that officers keep their mouths shut and learn to deal with personal issues personally.

Symbolic silence is evident on the part of law enforcement personnel to mutually deny the truth about officer suicide within its rank; the idea that if we do not talk about the elephant in the department, it does not exist. Denial often evolves out of the need to elude pain (Zerubavel, 2006). A mere acknowledgement of something painful jeopardizes one's own well-being, resulting in the activation of internal mechanisms used to keep such painful and disturbing knowledge from penetrating into the consciousness (Zerubavel, 2006).

Denial is not only apparent within the department but also the communities being policed. The general public remains largely unaware of the daily devastation and horrific incidents witnessed by law enforcement (Henry, 2004). Silence and denial provide dangerous, possibly deadly facades for law enforcement to hide behind. "[V]isible to anyone willing to simply keep one's eyes open ... if anyone fails to notice it, it can only be as a result of deliberate avoidance,

since otherwise it would be quite impossible *not* to notice it ...to ignore an elephant is to ignore the obvious” (Zerubavel, 2006, p. 11).

The truth remains we have skirted around this topic long enough. The elephant has grown too large to continue to conceal or ignore. We can no longer deny the fact that officers are taking their own lives. We must ACT— (A) acknowledge, (C) communicate, and (T) train officers on the hazards of the job. Officers and administrators must acknowledge suicide as a leading cause of death for law enforcement officers. In doing so, we not only alert officers to potential occupational hazards earlier in their careers, we open the lines of two-way communication for law enforcement personnel to start talking about difficult issues. More importantly, we demonstrate through intentional action we are concerned with officers overall safety and well-being.

About the Author

During her research on police safety issues, Dr. Olivia Johnson discovered the leading cause of officer death was not accidents or homicide, but rather suicide. This compelled her to refocus in the area of officer suicide and through her research was named the Illinois State Representative for the National Police Suicide Foundation. In March 2010, she received her doctorate degree in Organizational Leadership Management, from the University of Phoenix. In June 2010, she was invited to speak at the Beyond Survival Toward Officer Wellness [BeSTOW] Symposium sponsored by the FBI Behavioral Science Unit. Dr. Johnson currently collaborates with The Journal of Global Health Care Systems as an advisory board member, author and editor and is a member of the International Law Enforcement Educators and Trainers Association (ILEETA).

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