

Self Awareness: Preventing **Police** "Burn-Out"

EMOTIONAL SURVIVAL IN A LAW ENFORCEMENT CAREER



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Dedication

This booklet is gratefully dedicated to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and to my late parents, Claude and Inez Prosser, all of whom have been more forgiving than I deserve.

Preface

The purpose of this book? Self Awareness. Plain and simple. No deep analysis, no "head shrinker" rationale, no excuses. Just one former officer's lessons learned, and the hope that the consequences of his lack of self awareness may not be suffered by the next duty watch.

There are no absolutes, no black and white answers or "cure all" remedies. But there are effective ways to detect and combat "police burnout" that are much less painful than divorce, social withdrawal, chronic behavior problems, and even suicide.

A Brief Statement of Purpose

I became a patrol officer with the Birmingham, Alabama Police Department in the summer of 1972, after serving in the U.S. Army Military Police Corps for three years, including a tour of duty in Vietnam. I was blessed to attain a level of proficiency in Traffic Accident Investigation generally considered to be unmatched in the previous history of the department, and I became skilled in a wide variety of policing functions and tactics. But I came to realize that the job could be quite debilitating when allowed to dominate an officer's life unchecked. I realized late in my career that many areas of my life were being "tainted" by this all consuming vocation, and that some of the behavior patterns and "changes" that began manifesting themselves all too frequently were not simply random happen-stances, but were related to a common factor . . . the job. Born of a love for my fellow police officers, veterans and rookies alike, I determined to create an attitude of awareness that would serve to help these officers avoid some of the pitfalls and problems that are inherent to the profession. I trust that this booklet will be a small contribution to that end. May God bless your career of service.

Cliff Prosser

Table of Contents

Dedication	<i>Page 2</i>
Preface and Statement of Purpose	<i>Page 3</i>
I. In The Beginning	<i>Page 5</i>
II. Reality Sets In	<i>Page 6</i>
III. The "Change" Begins	<i>Page 7</i>
IV. Emotional Impotence	<i>Page 9</i>
V. "It's Just A Job!" Yeah, Right!	<i>Page 11</i>
VI. "Us" Against "Them"	<i>Page 14</i>
VII. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder	<i>Page 16</i>
VIII.. Prevention and Treatment	<i>Page 19</i>
Epilogue	<i>Page 25</i>

Chapter I

In The Beginning

Why do we as presumably normal young people **choose** to become police officers? I say "choose to become" because each of us did have a choice. The last I heard, the "draft" was still not in effect for civil service positions! And then comes the really big question . . . would we have made the same choice if we **knew** what it would be like and what it would cost?

The reasons most often given may or may not be the actual stimuli behind the decisions made, but these are just a few of the most common:

1. *"I want to make a difference."*
2. *"The excitement . . . I can't stand to be bored all day."*
3. *"My dad was a cop, and I guess I was born into it."*
4. *"It was the obvious place to go when I got out of the service."*
5. *"If I can help just one person, it will all be worth it."*
6. *"It's a clean, honest, personally rewarding and satisfying vocation."*
7. *"I'm a 'people person', and this job will put me right in the middle of 'em."*
8. *"I just signed up for the test while I was job hunting, and they called me."*

We can see from these reasons that some people become law enforcement officers because they think that they have an ideal to follow, and others were just "in the right place at the right time". Will the applicants motivated by stated ideals become "better" police officers than the applicants who just kind of stumble into the job? We tend to think so, but it's not a "given" by any means. We as citizens who need the police would like to think that it doesn't make any difference **why** they apply, that the screening and training procedures will produce wise, capable and caring law officers. And the officers themselves tend to believe at the outset that they can "fix" anything, that they are well equipped to cure what's wrong with society. Some even feel that they will succeed where others may have failed; that they will quickly "clean up" their little corner of the world, just like it happened on TV last week.

Those of us who have served can look back on that day that we graduated from the police academy as the "squeaky clean" beginning of what we then thought would be an "eagle scout" type career.

Chapter II

Reality Sets In

The inevitable . . . the "real world". This is the police officer's work place. It is his or her laboratory; where he or she will "experiment" with ideas on how to do the job just a little bit better. It is his or her office, where efficiency and neatness and communication skills and spelling and punctuation and accuracy and numbers and productivity and all the other "work nouns" mean something. It is his or her crystal display case, wherein he or she is glaringly visible to others.

The two primary areas of training for new police recruits are, generally speaking: (1.) Dealing with people, and (2.) Survival. The fact that these two items are key to the career work skills speaks volumes. Think about it. These two ideas, when expressed together, plainly describe a confrontational environment . . . "To survive while dealing with people."

Let's put things in perspective before we go any further. **Nobody calls the cops because something good happened!** It's just that simple. It's a negative environment, and the police officer lives in that environment at least 8 hours everyday. And the longer that he or she is immersed in that negative environment, the less clear the line between those 8 duty hours and the supposed 16 off duty hours becomes. The officer sees the worst that people do to other people on a regular basis. He or she simply moves from one unpleasant situation to the next, often helpless to do much about it except report after the fact.

Author's Note: Sometime back I was in my dentist's chair, and we were talking. Like many professional people, my dentist is something of a "closet cop". He'd like nothing better than to work the streets, but he kind of liked the idea of adding a couple of zeros to his paycheck bottom line. I was pretty much a "captive audience", so he seized the opportunity to "pick my brain" a little bit about my police experience. When I began to explain how the negative influences begin to take a toll, the expression on his face told me that I had hit a nerve. He said "You know . . . you're right. I never get a phone call from someone who wants to tell me how good his or her teeth feel. It's always a matter of pain or discomfort . . . and if they felt like they really had a choice, they wouldn't ever want to lay eyes on me!" Sound trivial? Well, consider this. Police Officers and Dentists have always ranked near the top in profession related suicide incidents!

We begin to think back on that graduation day at the academy. We couldn't wait to get out in the field . . . out into the real world as a real cop. But the truth is that our shiny ideals began to show a little tarnish as they were subjected to the dirt of real police work.

Chapter III

The Change Begins

It's so very subtle. It doesn't attack us like the "perpetual aggressor" that we're taught to be ready for. It's slow, but it's steady. And it's as sure as death and taxes. It's **Cynicism**. Simply expressed, it's a general feeling of distrust of those around us. As the dirt of all the negative encounters a police officer has begins to collect in the corners of his or her psyche, he or she begins to feel more and more alienated from "*them*" . . .the regular people. After all, they do bad things to each other. They hurt children. They maim and kill each other. They maim and kill cops. And they *lie*! They don't like cops, or understand cops. They look at cops like they're different. They're afraid of cops. Cops are better off sticking together and pretty much staying away from "*civilians*". Other cops understand . . .they've been there. These eccentric feelings don't come upon the officer in an easily understood and manageable way. They are insidious, creeping into just the edges of the officer's state of mind and gradually consuming more and more of it.

How does this phenomenon manifest itself? This general feeling of defensiveness and distrust of those around one becomes visible in several ways. Many police officers begin to associate themselves more and more with other police officers, and fewer and fewer "regular people". . . non-officers. There is the feeling of vulnerability when off duty and out of uniform. The officer probably sits facing the door in each restaurant he or she visits. Vacations aren't really vacations. As the officer drives down the interstate on the way to what should be a time of relaxation, he or she looks at each car that passes with just a touch of conditioned suspicion. "That car has been painted . . . some of the trim has paint on it. And the trunk lock has been punched out. The driver looks tense . . . he must have seen my FOP insignia. That's an out of state tag, but the car has an in town dealer emblem. Where is his right hand? No telling where he's been or what he's done." The officer may not even be fully aware of these "thoughts." And admittedly, these are conditioned responses that are unavoidable in the police job. He or she may even catch himself or herself almost unconsciously mentally noting tag numbers of passing cars from force of habit. These thoughts and traits are not only gained from experience, they are specifically taught. They may be necessary, but they take their toll on the peace of mind of the individual. Conditioned responses cannot be flipped on and off like a light switch just because one is "off duty", or put on and taken off with the uniform. They are an integral part of the life of the officer, and they are almost cancerous in the way that they eat at the officer's countenance and general state of mind. It's very hard for an individual to be truly "happy" when he or she has to be continually prepared for and expectant of bad things to happen.

Author's Note: As of this writing, I have been out of police work for almost ten years now, and I'm just beginning to lose some of my defensive idio-synchronies. I still feel a little vulnerable when I sit with my back to the door, but I don't "examine and inspect" every car that passes, or mentally file descriptions of every person I pass on the street anymore.

So much for the "shine" that was on the police career in the minds of most officers when they started. And yet, if you ask every police officer after 4 or 5 years of service how he or she likes his or her job, most will answer "I love it!" Are these officers just lying? Certainly not. But by the same token, most are not aware of the "changes" that are taking place in their personal lives and relationships, not to mention their thought processes and opinions.

If one were to ask the estranged or divorced wives of male police officers to state the most damaging effect of their husbands' police careers on their respective marriages, one would expect to hear about the danger, the strange working hours, the women "on the side", etc. But by and large, the problem stated by most police wives is the "change" that takes place in their husbands over time. "He's just not the same man I married" is an often heard comment. One suspects that it is much the same with the husbands of female officers, although there hasn't been the large "sampling" size by which to collect the data until recent times. And perhaps the most specific complaint: "He doesn't talk to me anymore." There's that cynicism again. That alienation and separation. The officer is faced with a little bit of a "Catch 22" in this . . . somewhat of a "no win" situation. Many officers are cautioned by their training officers and the academy cadre: "Don't take your job home. Your wife, or husband, doesn't need to hear about the garbage that you see every day. Talk about other things, not the job." This warning is well intentioned, but as the police job consumes more and more of the officer's mentality, there are fewer and fewer "other things" to talk about.

Chapter IV

Emotional Impotence

A police officer arrives at the scene of a "drive by shooting". As it turns out, the victim is not the intended target. A 3 year old girl lies dead in the front yard of a housing project unit where a stray bullet intended for her gang member brother has struck her in the head. One foot is still under her overturned tricycle, and there is a "smiley face" sticker on the front of her Minnie Mouse shirt because she was a good girl at day care kindergarten that day.

What are the emotions normally evoked in an individual who arrives at such a scene? Not only is it necessary for the officer to see the results of this tragedy, but he or she may have to find and notify the child's parent(s), talk with those who saw it happen, and possibly deal with the individual or individuals who caused it. The emotions that are evoked in most officers the first time they respond to such a situation are all but crippling at the moment. Sorrow, despair, anger, frustration, even grief are some.

An officer is dispatched to a fatal traffic accident. The victim wasn't even at fault. A few moments ago he or she was headed for school to pick up the kids, or maybe to a job interview after college graduation. And then there's the chore of notifying next of kin. Can't someone else do that? Why me? Because it's the officer's job, and someone has to do it. Many of the same emotions are evoked in this situation as in the shooting death incident described above.

It doesn't take the officer too many calls like these before he or she realizes that he or she cannot afford to feel these emotions every time the radio calls his or her unit number. It is counter-productive, and it hurts. The officer begins the task of "desensitizing", and begins "de-personalizing" the victims of such situations. The officer has to function, and he or she can't function at full effectiveness if the feelings are too strong, it seems. Anyone who has spent much time around police officers, nurses, paramedics or the like has no doubt heard the seemingly callused comments and jokes of "dark humor" about the victims and patients. This is simply a defense mechanism. Like physical calluses on finger tips, etc., these emotional calluses become thicker and harder with time, and it becomes more difficult to "feel" in a normal way.

All this might be well and good if it could be limited to the job situation. But just as the defensive posture and the suspicion toward those around the officer cannot be turned on and off, neither can this emotional callusing. The officer begins to be less expressive of feelings, even to his or her family, because he or she becomes less aware of the feelings. This ties in with the "he doesn't talk to me anymore" syndrome, as well.

Author's Note: As an interesting side note, I noticed that after I had left police service and distanced myself somewhat from those type experiences, the emotional calluses began to gradually soften and go away. The result was frightening. I began to feel things so much more intensely, and I became aware of how I must have been before.

The onset of the callusing is so gradual that officers don't always realize that it's happening, and when the feelings return, they seem to be so much more acute. I

really don't think that I could go back now and be exposed to the same experiences without a lot of pain.

There is often a detrimental side effect to this "numbing" of emotions where the officers' children are concerned. The officer spends a great deal of his or her life observing and passing judgment on the behavior of others. This responsibility, along with the emotional impotence that was discussed earlier, can seriously effect an officer's relationship with his or her kids. The relationship becomes more of a "What are you doing?" and "Where have you been?" type of thing than a "Who are you and what do you think and feel?" type of thing. There is often an overprotective impulse. The officer subconsciously interjects his or her child into that situation that he or she responded to on duty today, or yesterday, or even last year, and it's frightening. The officer feels an added pressing urge to protect that child. It's not terribly uncommon for the "cop's kids" to rebel, much like the "preacher's kids" we've all heard about.

Chapter V

"It's Just A Job!" . . . Yeah, Right!

"What would you be doing if you weren't a cop?" Virtually every police officer has been asked this question at one time or another. And contrary to what most people believe, most officers have an alternative career field. Most had initially been "pointed" toward another livelihood, or have talents and abilities that are marketable in another sector. Most officers are in police work for one reason . . . they **want** to be! Even those offspring of officers who are thought to have "inherited" the career make a conscious decision at some point to enter law enforcement in lieu of something else. It's relatively rare, it seems, for an officer to steer his child toward the police career. Perhaps this is because the officer has some subconscious understanding of the inherent problems. Or perhaps the officer has much more self awareness than most of his associates have.

In its simplest form, being a cop is easy. You dress up and go to work, and they pay you every couple of weeks. It's similar in philosophy to a career in athletics. You get paid for doing something you like, and you'd probably do it for free if you had to.

Author's Note: I spent most of my fourteen years amazed that the city was paying me for doing what I was doing. In my mind, it was the greatest job that anyone could have.

But it's not that simple. It's addictive. And like any other type of addiction, there are detrimental side effects.

"It's just a job!" **Wrong!** . . . it's a lifestyle, and it's a lifestyle with a distinct subculture. As police officers band together for protection, an entire subculture seems to emerge. There is a certain "veil of secrecy" to the behavior, a "circle of trust" within which most non-officers are denied access, and such a protective brotherhood that even criminal activity is sometimes condoned, or at least concealed, rather than have the brotherhood compromised. In the police subculture, accountability is to each other, and not to the public or the "company". Loyalty to each other is paramount . . . all else is of a lower priority.

It's very difficult to explain clearly and succinctly, but it is a common occurrence for a pattern of deviant behavior to develop within the circle of security that the police brotherhood offers. Police officers may indulge in behavior that is best compared with that of high school kids "raising hell" when their parents aren't around, or young servicemen on a weekend pass. Many officers may have read the popular book "The Choirboys" written by Joseph Wambaugh some years back, or may have seen the movie made from the book. This story colorfully illustrates the police subculture, and fairly accurately presents the sometimes wild behavior of police officers "blowing off steam" with each other. These gatherings are usually limited to the "brotherhood", unless police "groupies" are allowed in. This behavior is hardly ever seen, or even heard about, by the "regular people". This police ritual is most often practiced behind the protective veil of the brotherhood.

This all sounds secretive and dirty, but it's very much a "behind the scenes" type

phenomenon. This is just a manifestation of the "defense mechanisms" that officers develop. It's really a "circle the wagons" mentality.

Consider again the list of common reasons people give for becoming law enforcement officers and judge how those reasons hold up with experience.

1. **"I want to make a difference."**

How many instances of "revolving door" arrests, of arriving at crime scenes a minute too late, of reporting incidents after the fact rather than preventing them, of talking to kids only to see them later at the booking desk . . . does it take to turn this ideal of "making a difference" into wishful thinking ?

2. **"The excitement . . . I can't stand to be bored all day."**

Anyone who has policed very much knows all too well that it can be a lot longer between adrenaline rushes than the TV cop shows make it appear.

3. **"My dad was a cop, and I guess I was born into it."**

If dad has talked to and been honest with his son or daughter, there shouldn't be many surprises. But if dad withdrew from his family as many officers do, the child following in dad's footsteps may not know as much about what to expect as he or she might think.

4. **"It was the obvious place to go when I got out of the service."**

What can be said about this one? Just an opportunistic young person taking advantage of a civil service job slot.

5. **"If I can help just one person, it will all be worth it."**

Great philosophy, but few individuals literally mean that they would be satisfied with this.

6. **"It's a clean, honest, personally rewarding and satisfying vocation."**

It has been shown in studies that one of the greatest causes of stress in workers of a particular profession is the inability to perceive the fruits of their efforts. A factory worker who can see a pile of welded pipe at the end of the day has little reason to feel he has not done a good job. He can see it. A carpet installer can walk out of a house feeling that he or she has done something tangible. He or she can see it, touch it, and can appreciate the results of the effort invested. It is difficult for police officers to inject any tangibility into the work product. An officer may indeed be very tired at the end of a shift, but he or she may have a hard time identifying the "fruits of labor". Job satisfaction isn't readily obtainable, unless the officer has the unique ability to **reason** in a constructive way about such things.

7. **"I'm a 'people person', and this job will put me right in the middle of 'em."**

No truer words have ever been spoken. But in light of what was discussed earlier in the text about police officers seeing the worst that people do to other people, the officer inevitably begins to form the opinion: "What's so great about people? There are three types of people: the bad guys, the victims, and the blissfully ignorant who haven't be-

come victims . . . yet."

8. **"I just signed up for the test while I was job hunting, and they called me."**

Just a guy or gal looking for a decent job with medical insurance and a pension. No noble expectations, no idealistic dreams to be shattered.

When these reasons for serving are recalled and examined after a few years of police experience, it seems that the applicants who seemingly had the most noble reasons for "joining the force" have the most to lose to disappointment and frustration. It's ironic that the applicants who seem to be the least vulnerable to "fallen ideals" are the ones who had the least noble reasons for applying.

Author's Note: I'm painfully aware that the text to this point must seem to paint a pretty ugly picture of the police career. I don't want to be guilty of being a "doom and gloom" philosopher, or a generalizing pessimist. There are some wonderful things about a career in law enforcement, and I thoroughly enjoyed mine. But in retrospect, I can "see" some things that I was totally blind to then; things which would not have been the damaging problems that they ultimately were had I been aware of them then and done something to correct them. And to be honest, we can't consider "remedies" until we have identified all of the "symptoms" of the "illness". I assure you that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Some suggested "tools" of prevention will be discussed later in the text.

Chapter VI

Us Against Them

The influences on, and the experiences of, the average police officer quickly instill in the officer an adversary attitude. It's "Us" Against "Them". It's "us" against the bad guys. It's "us" against the defense attorneys. It's "us" against the public, because they don't know what it's like to be a cop. It's "us" against the so-called "normal people". It's "us" against the rich folks because they think they're exempt from authority. It's "us" against everybody!

This sounds a great deal like a combative mentality, and probably it is in some officers. But it's more a problem of perceived segregation. Police officers are somehow different than the rest of society. They stand out to the "normal people" because of their uniforms, the paint jobs of their cars, the lights, etc. and they are to be avoided unless a citizen absolutely needs help. This is where the "shine" disappears from the officer's perception of his or her job. In the beginning, the fact that he or she "stood out" was appealing. That uniform was beautiful, and the more people who saw it, the better the officer liked it. As time wore on, it became a hindrance, a barrier between the officer and the public. It seemed to be almost a repellent. It put people on their guard; the behavior around the officer wasn't "normal". The feeling was that of being a "preacher at a beer party". He or she just didn't fit.

Author's Note: While I was studying criminal justice in college, I was so conscious of alienating people with my uniform that I made it a point to attend at least the first three or four sessions of each subject class in "civies". Once I had become acquainted with the class members, I would wear the uniform to class. Talk about getting some strange looks! But the "dye was cast", so to speak. The members of the class got to know me first as a student, and not as an authority figure that instilled fear or anxiety. It made things go much smoother, and it seemed to soften that adversary feeling.

Fact: There are many jobs in the world more dangerous than police work.

Fact: There are no other jobs in which the danger is so ever-present.

A firefighter's job is more dangerous than a police officer's, but the danger is predictable and easily identified. It's also relatively time specific. When the alarm sounds, the danger begins. When the fire truck is backed into the station, the danger ends. The same is true for the most part with factory workers, etc. The "dangerous things" are easily identified. The police officer never knows from where the danger will approach, or when. The "perpetual aggressor" referred to earlier is the danger. Who he or she is, or where he or she will come from is unknown, so the officer must expect the worst all the time. This only serves to deeply ingrain the defensive, suspicious mindset that was discussed previously.

Author's Note: I don't know if the feeling of being somewhat segregated from the rest of humanity is as strongly felt by other police officers, but it was by me. Although I was proud to be a policeman, and especially proud to be a part of the Tactical Operations Unit, or Tact Squad, of the Birmingham Police Department, I was never completely free of the desire to be "just like everybody else." I tired of having people change their behavior just because I was around. I got sick of being asked at parties "What's it like to be a policeman? Have you ever killed anyone?" I really wished that just once I could be inconspicuous. I wanted more than anything to let the people around me know that I really wasn't different from them. This is somewhat paradoxical from the mentality that had been hammered into me that cops are different. It's "us against them", remember? The confusion and mixed emotions didn't do much to simplify matters.

Chapter VII

Post Traumatic Stress

It doesn't take a genius to understand that the combination of negative experiences accumulating over the years, and the perpetually defensive mentality that are so inherent to the police profession, will take a toll on the officer and his or her family if there are no means of combating the effects. Add to this the sometime long work shifts, the financial problems common to many police families, the extra hours "moonlighting" to make ends meet, and the threat of extra-marital affairs that seems so common to police work, and the chances of stress related problems are extremely great.

The term "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder" is a relatively new one in the field of psychiatric medicine and behavioral studies. It's closely akin to what has been known for years as "Soldier's Heart" or "Shell Shock." It was first referred to as "Delayed Combat Stress" after the Vietnam War because of the tendency of the phenomenon to manifest itself years after the combat experience. PTSD, or some form of it, has existed for as long as there has been war. For that matter, it has existed for as long as people have been abusing people. Depression, substance abuse, behavioral changes, social withdrawal, paranoia, reduced motivation and productivity, personality changes, a suicidal propensity all may be symptomatic of this disorder.

Police officers are particularly vulnerable to this insidious malady. The difference between the effects of combat on soldiers and police work on officers is the intensity and duration of the exposure. Combat is more intense, but relatively short lived. Police work is usually a more diluted trauma, but the exposure may last for twenty years or more. The police officer may in fact experience combat trauma as well. There is relatively little difference between the sense of loss felt by a soldier when a buddy is killed and the loss felt by an officer when a brother or sister officer is killed. The shock of the occurrence and the sense of trauma may in fact be greater because there is less expectancy prior to the event. Death in combat is understandable, more acceptable. Violent death in a "peaceful" society is not acceptable, especially for the "good guys".

Author's Note: I had been a police officer about 9 years when a dear friend of mine, an officer that I had graduated the academy with, was killed by a robbery suspect on Christmas Day. The shock and the feeling of loss was devastating, even though I had served a tour in Vietnam, and I understood that death could take those close to you very suddenly. I understood the risks of police work. But for this to happen to a good man . . . in Birmingham, Alabama . . . during peacetime . . . was unacceptable to me. None of the combat experience, the training, or the understanding that it was part of the job made the reality of his death any more bearable for me.

It is becoming increasingly clear that **anyone** who is exposed to trauma may become a victim of PTSD. Rescue personnel, fire fighters, ambulance attendants, emergency room clinicians, critical care nurses, crime victims and witnesses, and police officers are all candidates for this malady.

Perhaps the most dangerous thing about this issue is the tendency of many in the police community to deny that this phenomenon even exists outside of combat, much less

that they could be susceptible to it. Police officers would like to believe that they are in control, that nothing can get to them. And like any problem, there must be awareness and admission before there can be solution.

One of the most difficult tasks for managers of personnel with regard to PTSD or other stress phenomenon is to identify the stress victims from the truly poor employees. Just as there is the tendency of lumping all of the "mis-behavers" together and labeling them all poor employees without regard to stress and burnout factors, there is the danger of trying to excuse poor job performance on the basis of stress. It is a fact of life that poor job performance should not be tolerated, and it is the responsibility of management to eliminate poor performance. Nothing in this text should be construed as meaning that poor job performance or mis-behavior should be tolerated under the guise of "burnout". But by the same token, the possibility of hidden stress causes for poor or erratic job performance and behavior should be at least considered, and means for prevention and treatment implemented. Good police officers should be "salvaged" whenever possible.

Police officers perceive themselves as rescuers and "fixers". They are supposed to be able to "fix what's broken" and solve the problems of mankind. Obviously, they often can't do this, and the frustration of failure is uniquely stressful.

Author's Note: I walked into a drug store, in uniform, on one occasion to pick up something. The clerk asked if I had been sent because of the sick employee that they had called in about. I answered that I had not heard any call go out yet, but that I would be glad to check on the employee and do what I could. I was directed to the pharmacy department, where I found a male pharmacist, about 55 to 60 years old, unconscious on the floor in what appeared to be full cardiac arrest. His associate was trying to administer CPR, so I immediately assisted. We worked for several minutes until the fire medics arrived to relieve us. The victim was pronounced dead several minutes later. I remember feeling so helpless. It wasn't supposed to happen like that. What about the happy ending? What about all the cases I'd heard about where the cop saved the guy's life? The "script" wasn't supposed to read this way. I must have done something wrong or he would be alive. I was told later that the victim had recently undergone very serious open heart surgery, and his prognosis wasn't very good. The heart attack that killed him was massive and un-survivable. He was basically dead before CPR was ever begun. The simple truth of the matter is that we can't "fix" everything; . . .we can't save everybody. Intellectually, we know this, but we have a hard time understanding and admitting this on an emotional level. It could be said that the rewards of police work are a little satisfaction, an occasional adrenaline rush, and a lot of frustration.

Alcohol abuse is a frequent behavior "red flag" in identifying stress problems and "burnout" in police officers. The drinking may be addictive in nature, or just behaviorally inappropriate in terms of when, where and how much. Decision making may become less and less responsible and reasonable.

Author's Note: I can recall the days when if you worked the evening shift there was a good chance that at least a few officers would get together for drinks after work, or even during work, on most nights. Every beat had its "hole", the officer's hiding place.

Alcohol is available, it's legal, it's socially acceptable, it's affordable, and it's the most common way for adults to rebel and misbehave. Although there are certainly officers who become addicted to other drugs, alcohol has caused more than its share of problems for burned out and stressed officers. The important thing to note here is that the drinking is very often symptomatic of burnout and stress, it is not the root problem. Too often inappropriate drinking is singled out as the bottom line of the problem, rather than a "clue" that there is a greater problem. Not every problem drinker is an alcoholic, although the possible disease aspect should not be automatically overlooked at the risk of encouraging denial. But whether inappropriate drinking is addictive or a more benign type of mis-behavior, the results can be the same. . . destroyed careers and marriages, even death.

Perhaps the most obvious source of post trauma stress is the situation that requires an officer to shoot an offender, or when an officer or officer's partner is injured by an offender. These events are understandably stressful, so the associated stress is not as "sneaky" or insidious in its attack. But it still must be dealt with. Police officers very often feel obliged to act like it's no big deal. . .the obligatory "macho" mode kicks in. It's just part of the job, and offender deserved it. Therefore, officers all too often fail to take stock of how they really feel, and they almost never admit it or tell anyone about it, because they perceive that to be weakness. Even more disturbing is the tendency for an officer to "second guess" his or her actions, to question the validity of his or her decision to shoot.

Most progressive departments now require officers involved in shootings incidents to have some counseling and evaluation. Any officer that experiences problems after a critical incident should be able to request help through an employee assistance program of some type and regain some balance and stability.

Chapter VIII

Prevention and "Treatment"

It must seem from the text to this point that a career in law enforcement is just one big maze of booby traps waiting for the unsuspecting, young, idealistic officer. It doesn't have to be that way. As with any "disease", there is prevention and treatment for "burnout" and stress. Also, as with any disease, prevention is more effective than, and preferable to, treatment.

If the reader will remember, at the beginning of this text, **Self Awareness** was identified as the goal of this book. If the police officer will remain self aware, symptoms of burnout and stress can be detected and handled. The "booby traps" can be defused before any damage is done.

While "self-awareness" may seem at first glance to be a self explanatory, easily accomplished virtue, it's certainly more elusive than it seems. Consider the point already made earlier in the text that the defense mechanisms employed by police officers work directly against the formation of self-awareness and self examination skills. The emotional callusing and the tendency to somewhat detach oneself from and "de-humanize" those around oneself does nothing to enhance the development of these self awareness skills in the officer. The effect is more likely just the opposite; the formation and proficiency of these skills are greatly inhibited.

Perhaps the most important method of prevention is to keep lines of communication open. The officer must **talk to** his or her family, friends, and fellow officers **honestly**. If something disturbing happens during a duty shift, it must be "vented" rather than stuffed in that emotional closet and ignored. Simply put: If something hurts, the officer should say so. If something makes the officer mad, he or she should say so. (Within reasonable behavioral parameters, of course.) "He doesn't talk to me any more." Remember that? **Talking is therapeutic!**

A young officer would do well to establish a small group of fellow officers with whom he or she can be open and honest, even weak and vulnerable. In other words, a few people that he or she can "get *real*" with. The concept of small group mentoring or discipleship is to inspire openness and honesty, as well as accountability and trust. Our goal as police officers shouldn't be to try to blow the top out of the testosterone meter, but to become better servants to our charges. As we do this, we also become better officers and more reliable colleagues to our fellow officers. The Bible uses the phrase "iron sharpens iron". This means that by God's grace men can make each other better through honest and open accountability.

Author's Note: One of the finest police officers I ever worked with was Bill Odom, a sniper on the tactical unit. I never had a reason to question his bravery, and I would have gone anyplace and faced anything with him with complete confidence. He was the classic "man's man". And yet he was the first man that I had ever met that had the confidence in his manhood and dedication to honesty to tell me that he loved me. Much of what I know about real friendship, I learned from him.

Stu Weber, a former Green Beret captain and Vietnam veteran spoke at the Promise Keepers rally in Birmingham in 1997. He spoke of the importance for every man to have a "man friend", a confidant. He used the term "tender warriors". We don't have to let the perceived machismo of our chosen profession lessen our sensitivities and effectiveness in relationships. Honest communication is an important key to balance and emotional health. And emotional health is vital to good police work.

Another key method of preventing the "self segregation" that many officers impose on themselves is to maintain a diverse circle of friends. This helps to lessen the chance that the "police subculture" will draw the officer in to the point that it becomes damaging to the balance of his or her life. The off duty time should be devoted to non-police relationships and activities to a greater degree than police related activities and colleagues. **Balance** is the key here.

The officer should learn to **be aware** of his or her behavior, and how it compares with what is acceptable as appropriate behavior for the level of responsibility facing the officer. Everyone has heard of "reading body language." This is a similar skill; learning to "listen" to what abnormal behavior might be trying to "say" in terms of a growing burnout or stress problem for an officer.

There is another combination of factors that certainly plays into the build up of stress and the occurrence of "burn-out" in the police officer. The term "combination of factors" is used because there is a definite relationship in the way of "cause and effect". That combination is: (1.) Working hours, and (2.) Level of income.

The police career is traditionally not a particularly lucrative one, and there is very little "margin for error" in managing money for the police officer who is married with children. It has already been stated that most police officers could be doing something else to earn a living. To carry that thought one step further, most police officers could be doing something else that pays better. There is a great temptation, even a necessity, for the police officer to "moonlight" to earn extra money, when permitted. The added factors of fatigue and "occupational saturation" come into play. Each officer should evaluate how much rest and relief from the "job atmosphere" that he or she is getting, but it is very difficult to "slow down" once a pattern has been established and the need for it seems to prevail.

Author's Note: During the last 6 or 7 years of my police service, I was working an average of 50 hours or more per week on duty, and an average of 16 to 24 hours per week on "extra jobs". It seemed that I was almost living in my uniform. In addition to my regular Freeway Patrol shift, I was "on-call" 24 hours a day for serious injury and fatal accident investigation and reconstruction. I was "on-call" 24 hours a day for "S.W.A.T." calls. I was asked to do suspect sketch art work at the request of detectives. I was trained and assigned as an "Identi-kit" technician. I was trained and assigned as a radar instructor. I was asked to do art work for "Crime-stoppers" and crime prevention programs. I was, along with the rest of the "Tact Unit", assigned to dignitary protection assignments and frequent special event assignments. I was assigned to teach the police academy in the subjects of Traffic Direction and Control and Traffic Accident Investigation. One might ask, "Well, what can you do about that?. . . it's your job!" True, but I could have said "No" once in a while. Some of the tasks itemized above, one will note, are preceded by the

words "I was asked to . . ." These were requests, not assignments. I didn't have the self-awareness to slow down and rest when I needed to! And the need for the off duty "moonlighting" that I did resulted in part from poor financial planning and management.

Police departments would be well served to provide counseling for police officers as needed. This may sound as if "one on one" therapist / patient sessions are being recommended. Obviously this would be very cumbersome and expensive to implement, and would tend to send the message: "There's something wrong with you . . . we've got to fix it!"

Actually, the Birmingham Police Department has as a part of its available employees' resources an Employee Assistance Service. A segment of this service is devoted to the very thing we're talking about . . . assistance, counseling and referral for treatment.

Author's Note: I am privileged to have been invited by Sarah Gentle of Employee Assistance to speak with most of the Police Academy classes that go through the Birmingham Police Academy. I have a great opportunity to help increase the awareness of young officers as to some of the problems, and remedies, that we are discussing here.

Most everyone has heard the catch phrase "Prevention is easier than Treatment". That idea is certainly true with regard to this subject. An effective method of preventive awareness, perhaps, would be the "Rap Group" format; to get police officers together to "voice" the effects of their collective experiences on themselves and their families. Likewise, to provide the same opportunities for the officers and their spouses. When problems and issues are voiced, **awareness** is accomplished. And even in the worst cases of "denial", awareness is increased at least to some extent as a "by-product". These sessions can be conducted at very little expense with groups of manageable size, (probably 20 or less), and would be very time efficient and extremely morale effective in the long term.

Another aspect of any individual's life that is extremely important in maintaining the balance we mentioned earlier is **spirituality**. It is tempting, in light of the influences of the police subculture and negative experiences, for the police officer to try to separate his or her career from his or her faith. Not only is this usually somewhat hypocritical by example, it is usually damaging to the officer in that he or she denies himself or herself the use of one of the strongest available weapons in the "battle for balance". **Faith should be lived, not practiced selectively.**

This is not to say that one should carry a Bible or a stack of religious tracts and "force feed" one's faith to everyone encountered during a shift. But the officer should strive to maintain a continuity and an effective "walk of faith" that does not change just because the uniform is put on and the environment changes. Easier said than done? Correct.

Author's Note: Like many other officers, I was raised by godly parents in a strong Christian home. It was a rare Sunday that our family was not at church, usually

both morning and evening services. I was pastored by one of the most devout Christian ministers of our time, in my opinion, "Brother Jimmy" Cantrell. As I reached manhood, I began teaching the "Young Married Couples" Sunday school class, and I was elected to the board of deacons. I was the picture of conservative Christianity . . . on Sunday. The problem was, I tended to wear my Christianity when I thought it was the "uniform of the day", rather than relying on my faith as a constant anchor in my life and career. Usually, when I put on the police uniform, I removed my Christianity, so to speak. I didn't denounce my belief in Christ, but I frequently turned my back on my faith when it was expedient to do so. I was very much swept away in the "undertow" of the police subculture, and it never dawned on me that the very thing that I was selfishly turning my back on was the most effective "life preserver" available to me. I lived for many years as two people, the cop and the Christian. My "playroom" was dirty, but I foolishly thought I could keep the "parlor" clean for God's eyes. I was a "show window Christian". Not only did I dishonor God with this type of hypocrisy, but my self esteem and self respect were greatly diminished. But once again, my lack of self-awareness prevented me from accurately diagnosing problems that were beginning to manifest themselves in my life, both professionally and personally. Although I was generally respected, it seemed, within my profession as a good police officer and a "cutting edge" traffic accident investigator, my behavior and my personal life began to deteriorate. I was making bad decisions about most things.

It was not until I was out of law enforcement for some time that I dealt honestly with my spirituality. My son was very nearly killed in a serious traffic accident, and he remained in a coma for sometime. For the first time in my life, I felt completely helpless.

As previously discussed, cops are "fixers"; they are accustomed to having some influence on what is happening around them. There was nothing I could do in this situation. I was a veteran of 14 years of police service, and a Vietnam combat veteran. But none of my experience, strength or "know how" could change this situation. There was nowhere to go but to God. Faced with this crisis, I finally surrendered my life to the Lord, rather than grudgingly letting Him into only the roped off, cleaned up parts of it. Christ has been Lord of my life ever since.

Thanks for permitting me a moment of personal testimony. Obviously, not all police officers are of the same faith, and the practices are different. But the point is that one's spirituality and faith should not be withheld from the career endeavor. When we try to deny ourselves God's wisdom and help, I believe that our happiness and our productivity suffer for it.

As I put a little distance between myself and my past police career, the influences of that environment lessened and I began to "see" problems and pitfalls that I had experienced in a clearer light. As self awareness improved, I began to talk more honestly and openly to family and friends, associate with more "normal" people, mature in my faith, and to enjoy a more balanced life.

Was it necessary for me to remove myself from the police career in order for me to become more self aware? I don't think so. I believe that it's simply a matter of establishing healthy priorities and practices. If a preventative "game plan" is devised, any offi-

cer can "dodge the bullet" of burnout and stress.

Simply put, the implementation of a few healthy practices will enable the police officer to combat the negative effects of police career stress and avoid the "burnout" that so often robs the officer of happiness and true job satisfaction. The following are some recommendations to the police officer that strives for an effective, balanced career:

1. **Communicate.** Talk to family and friends honestly about experiences and feelings.
2. **Maintain a diverse circle of friends.** The badge does not come with a pedigree! Enjoy people, and try to create positive relationships with people to offset the negative effects of the work environment contacts.
3. **Get out of the police environment as completely as possible when "off duty", and get plenty of rest.** Be sensitive to "job overload" that is avoidable.
4. **Work out a financial plan** that takes as much of the stress from "money troubles" out of life as possible. The money will only stretch so far, but money management is easier and there is less danger of financial difficulty that creates stress when you have a "plan" in effect.

With regard to points 3 and 4, rely on non police related talents and abilities to create a second income, if necessary. Some police agencies have regulations that prohibit "moonlighting" of any kind, but many do not. A supplemental income from artistic endeavors, from construction and home improvement contracting or sub-contracting, landscaping or lawn maintenance, etc., helps ease the economic pressure, and contributes quite a bit to the balance that is so important. But once again, take care to get enough rest.

5. **Live your faith.** To quote a sign seen recently on a church marquee: "Make prayer your first response, not your last resort." Choose, and attend, a church of your faith, and "feed your faith" with worship and study. Don't separate your career from your faith. If your department or agency has a "Fellowship of Christian Police Officers" or similar organization, check it out and attend as often as possible. It can be a tremendous "life support" system, and also helps to give the all important balance that has been discussed repeatedly in this book. Get to know, and make use of, your police chaplain(s).

6. **Create positive experiences within your career.** Volunteer for assignments that allow you to identify tangible rewards for the effort invested, when possible. School visitation and education projects, police athletic teams, drug education projects, crime prevention and education details, will all serve to inject some easily recognized career satisfaction into an otherwise negative work environment.

7. Acknowledge and accept the fact that you cannot control all of the people and events around you, that you cannot save everyone, that you cannot be everything to everyone. **Know your limitations.** Understand that limitations aren't synonymous with "failure".

8. **Nurture your family.** Don't exclude them from, or try to isolate them from, your ca-

reer. Talk frankly with your wife, or husband, about your desire to avoid the stress and burnout problems. "Educate" your family on these dangers and invite them to give you honest, constructive "feedback" if they notice or become concerned about your increased negativity or other "changes". And when the feedback comes in, don't react defensively . . . accept it and deal with it appropriately.

9. Be aware of your behavior, and be particularly aware of changes in your behavior.

10. Maintain other interests and balance your life with other activities that provide release from the police mentality and regimented routine.

11. Take care of yourself. Be mindful of physical conditioning and develop healthy practices. Fight the urge to become too sedentary in your lifestyle . . . stay active and get enough exercise. But by the same token, be sure to devote some time to **rest**.

Author's Note: During the past 18 to 20 years, no fewer than 26 current or former police officers that I worked with have died. Not from violence, but from heart attack, stroke, or cancer. At this writing I am 59 years of age, and virtually all of these men were within 5 years of my age, more or less. Coincidence? I wouldn't count on it. The combination of the stress factors discussed earlier and an unhealthy lifestyle can be deadly. I learned several years ago that California's codified statewide police system provides for disability ratings for officers who acquired chronic cardiovascular disease after serving for at least five years. After five years of police service, a disability of this type is considered to be job related. To date, agencies in this part of the country are resisting this policy because it is an ominous occupational health problem.

It sounds a great deal as if "the job" is responsible for everything that could possibly be wrong or out of sync in the life of a police officer. This, of course, is not true. But if a law enforcement career is not properly managed, the effects of "the job" can poison otherwise healthy areas, and set the officer up for unnecessary problems. Much like a bad battery can destroy good batteries when placed in a piece of equipment with them, a poorly managed, obsessive or all-consuming law enforcement career can easily drain the life out of other life areas.

Epilogue

Let me make something absolutely clear, if I have not already done so. I am not a psychiatrist or psychologist. Nor am I a trained counselor or behavioral science clinician of any kind. I do not intend to suggest that I have any special expertise in occupational stress or behavior modification studies or techniques. I don't have all the answers . . . I don't even know all the questions. I can't save your marriage. I can't save your life. I can't make you happy, and I can't make you a good cop. I can't give you any guarantees, and I can't make the world of police work any prettier or more positive. I don't have any way of making you exempt from the stresses . . .

. . . But I do have pretty decent hindsight.

**LEARN TO KNOW YOURSELF . . . LEARN TO LIKE YOURSELF . . .
LEARN TO LISTEN TO YOURSELF . . . AND TO OTHERS.**

God Bless!

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