

Letter to Editor

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Welcome to this edition of AS Neurology Journal. As a first responder (currently retired) I was trained to recognize and respond to crisis incidents by utilizing tactical strategies. However, once the critical incident was under control we were not trained to cope with or recognize how the direct exposure of the crisis could impact our lives. As a result of repetitive and cumulative traumatic stress a first responders' life can be directly affected cognitively, behaviorally, emotionally and psychologically.

My husband is a retired Viet Nam veteran and a retired police sergeant of over 31 years of service. I have over 23 years of service as a patrol officer working in undercover capacity, patrol, community service officer and domestic violence, child abuse and elderly abuse investigations. Both of us understand the inevitable stress and anxiety that comes with this job. We understand the long hours, shift work, lack of sleep, exposure to human suffering, death and carnage. We understand the emotions of anger over situations out of our control, the feelings of being powerless to help those very ones we are sworn to protect and the fact that each call could potentially be your last. Although we, like many of our first responder comrades, may be aware of these factors when initially accepting these responsibilities; it is the exposure to the accumulation of events outside of the responders' realm of control that results in traumatic stress syndrome and burnout.

Traumatic stress syndrome can have a significantly negative impact on the first responders' ability to function in their daily lives. The inability to communicate and seek support from family, friends or colleagues can lead to anxiety, depression, withdrawal from family and friends, fatigue, and increased hostility, irritability or anger brought on by a feeling of hopelessness. Burnout results from the day in and day out accumulation of emotional stress without a release. First responder burnout, both on and off the job, can result in substance abuse, difficulty concentrating, making decisions and can contribute to attitudes of cynicism, pessimism, distrust of others and contempt for the public, management, and society in general.

The job of a first responder is a stressful and challenging occupation. The occupation itself lends to a specific mindset or subculture of not seeking mental help due to the public persona of weakness or vulnerability. First responders fear they risk being labeled or taken out of their original positions and put into insignificant roles if they seek assistance with mental health disorders, stress or anxiety.

The ability to be taken care of instead of always being the one taking of the situation is not something a first responder is used to. Until recently the impact that a first responder career has on an individual was unrecognized and misunderstood. Unfortunately, the influence of actual and or perceived trauma on the first responder often goes undiagnosed for years and follows many into retirement. Support and prevention awareness for not only the first responders but also their families can help ease the transition into retirement, help reduce the susceptibility to stress, anxiety and post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSS). Information and knowledge is what gives a person power over their life and ultimate destiny. Next time you hear sirens or see an accident and say a prayer for the victims, please remember our first responders as well

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