TREATING POLICE STRESS

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TREATING POLICE STRESS

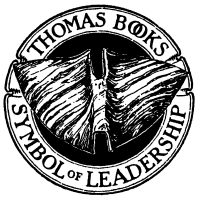
The Work and the Words of Peer Counselors

By

JOHN M. MADONNA, JR., Ed.D.

and

RICHARD E. KELLY, Ed.D.



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Phillip A. Trapasso holds a master of social work degree from Boston College. He retired from the Massachusetts State Police at the rank of Captain after having served for over thirty years. He served in several field-duty stations and is well known for his work as one of the first Psychological Services Unit (Stress Unit) members. He later held the position of Commandant of the State Police Academy for several years and retired as the department's sexual harassment officer. He currently works as a consultant to the public and private sector on traumatic stress response.

This book is dedicated to the men and women in law enforcement who risk their lives in the service of others, and to their fellow officers, the stress responder-peer counselors who go bravely with them. And in particular we honor John Barry, Ph.D., Stoneham, Massachusetts, "Doctor John", and Patrolman Edward C. Donovan, Boston Police Department (retired), "Eddie", two of the men who led the charge to bring care to the wounded and spread the word of healing and recovery.

FOREWORD

Police service is among the most paradoxical of professions. At one moment an officer is part of a thin line of defense against the evil of the world. He or she must vigorously suppress the "softer" emotions and present oneself as controlled, hard, and an impregnable fortress for those who depend upon the shield. In the next moment, the very same officer tenderly holds a distressed child or shows great reverence to a weak old man who fought an enemy army across the sea so many years ago. Law enforcement is often hours of boredom interrupted periodically by moments of sheer terror. It is the painfully slow work of meticulous puzzle-building. It is also the supercharged pace of an urban battlefield or a high-speed chase.

Each human contact leaves an indelible mark on an officer's psyche. Some contacts leave only the slightest scratch, barely perceptible. Other contacts uplift and inspire and are memorable; they help to fill in the dents and dings of work behind the badge. They polish the character of the officer. They can strengthen the law enforcement officer's spirit. There are also the contacts that wound and mangle and scar the soul. After the deepest scars, personalities can change, relationships are altered, control is lost, sleep is disturbed, performance is diminished, and health is threatened. Law enforcement officers can teeter on the brink of professional and personal destruction. Some are lost to the profession, to their families, and to themselves.

Stepping back from the edge of ruin is not a simple task. It is difficult to let out the emotions that one has worked so hard to keep in check. It is difficult to admit that one's fortress has been penetrated. A guide is often necessary to ensure that an officer on the edge of doom takes the right steps toward recovery and adaptive functioning.

Not every guide is trusted. Credibility is absolutely essential. Education alone will not be sufficient. No one really cares what degrees a person has or where they obtained those degrees. The real-world experience of having "been there" in the streets is honored and expected. Law enforcement personnel will not talk to just anybody about their inner pain. Trust is given only to credible resources that have proven their value to the officer.

Peer support personnel or peer counselors are among the few who have achieved a position of trust among law enforcement officers. No one should underestimate the power of the peer. Like the military medics of World War II, police peers have been on the front lines; they have worked the streets. They have taken the middle-of-the-night calls for guidance. They have sat with distressed officers for long, lonely hours. Police peers have heard the most closely guarded secrets. They have listened to the pain, vulnerability, marital discord, and life disruption associated with police work. They have done what they can to heal wounds and refresh tired spirits. They have earned the respect and trust of their fellow officers.

Police peer support personnel have proven their value persistently and consistently over the last three decades. They have been dedicated and creative in the face of limited resources and overwhelming need for their services. Police peer counselors have donated generously of their own time. There has been no extra pay or privilege for the services they have provided. The only privilege is the joy of helping another person. They have provided crisis-intervention services according to the core principles of simplicity, brevity, pragmatism, innovation, proximity, immediacy, and expectancy. Bridges have been built to mental health professionals. Alcohol problems have been controlled. Traumatic stress has been reduced and resolved. Careers have been salvaged; relationships have been healed; lives have been saved. They have made a difference.

Treating Police Stress: The Work and the Words of Peer Counselors is the story of police peers. It presents their history. It describes their strategies and tactics. It explains the enemy they face and the progress they have made. It gives insights into the frustrations caused by administrative hassles that ultimately contributed to failures to reach law enforcement officers in time to make a real difference.

John Madonna and Richard Kelly have written well. *Treating Police Stress* is a benchmark in the field of peer counseling. It provides clear guidelines for those who wish to emulate the best. Nothing quite like it has been written before. Future writers will have to work hard to meet or surpass both its quality and comprehensiveness. The story is John and Richard's story, but it goes far beyond their own experiences. It incorporates the experiences and words of many others who have been there to try to make a difference by reaching out when an officer's pain became unbearable.

Jeffrey T. Mitchell, Ph.D., CTS
President
International Critical Incident Stress Foundation

Old Paint

Like the practice of artists putting new art over old, so too the mind will layer its indelible memories. The peer counselor was used to the living ghosts of past traumas when the accumulation of years of haunting finally made the coping of each day impossible. When the fifty-something officer from the small town department called to talk, it was not surprising that it wasn't completely his idea—it almost never is. He said it was because his wife was dying of cancer and he was having trouble dealing with it—and, oh yeah, his chief told him to.

Like many of his clients, the peer counselor met the officer sitting driver's door to driver's door in an out of the way spot with radios crackling in the background. It's comfortable for cops that way—they can watch each other's back, protecting against the ever so unlikely, but possible, assailant and the not so unlikely patrol supervisor. They are also only a gas pedal away from exit if the conversation doesn't go as desired.

The top painting on the canvas was the illness. It was real, it was hard, and it was making other things throb. The marriage wasn't that good, he was unfaithful, the guilt was setting in and perhaps worse, he wasn't sure he could stop the liaison. But there were chips under the paint that showed another picture. Years of work with others hinted at that the familiar blur between symptom and cause, between destructive poor choices of coping through escape into substance abuse or sex and the never-ceasing pressure of endless loop images clawing for air time in his mind.

Pealing the paint away revealed a rather nasty shooting incident a few years earlier—relatively recent in the half-lives of traumas that decay little with time. It met all the basic criteria of an event that needed debriefing—it was life or death, shots were fired, and there was no shortage of second-guessing afterward. Exploration soon led to the discovery by comparison of an earlier police experience nearly two decades before when at another department over a thousand miles away the officer had to pull a badly decayed body out of the water—a painting within a painting.

The restoration of each of the paintings and the consequent and simultaneous debriefings took place over several more parking lot sessions. The officer had never connected his experiences with the effect they had on who he was and how he behaved. He was guided through time, past and present, to look at the things he survived that reeked of death and fear and the things he did each day to keep himself numbed or distracted.

Things seemed to be going well. Memories and reactions were normalized, the officer was supported, he was tutored on what trauma can do, and he put words on the events that for years had only been images with inescapable physical associations of fear and revulsion. He was dealing with things better and was working towards making decisions about his life instead of it making decisions for him. Even the poorest artists of old rarely put a third painting on a canvas, but the officer revealed his when he reported new dreams of old nightmares—fright-filled recollections of being a teenage Marine in fierce combat, month after month after month—of being bitterly cold, frightened, and overrun by the enemy.

Maybe keeping separate all of these memories and the destructive coping mechanisms they spawned was his way of being able to continue functioning. Maybe they were just, each one, too powerful to keep in mind. But they were also too powerful to keep down. To the amazement of the peer work began again on yet another group of traumatic memories—perhaps the first etchings on an overladen tableau.

R.E.K.

INTRODUCTION

The idea for this book came from the heart and the mind of the principle author, John Madonna. He had worked for years as a mental health professional in New England's second largest city, Worcester. He was "volunteered" for the work of counseling police officers and their families by "friends" of his who thought correctly that he would well serve this unique population. That was several decades ago, and his work continues. Many professionals are resistant to dealing with clients who at least appear to be cynical, paranoid, rigid, and aggressive–and armed. The stress unit/peer support officers of the Worcester Police Department and the Massachusetts State Police referred many of their co-workers to John's able hands, and it was from them that the idea came to write about work and to spread the good news of hope to others.

In an effort to understand the experience of the police stress unit responder, interviews were conducted of all of the officers of the Worcester Police Department who have served as stress responders since the inception of that unit twenty years ago. In order of their work in the unit they are, Patrolmen Bill McClune, John Mahan, Bill Gilbert, and Jack Germain. The chief of that agency, Edward Gardella (since retired), who was instrumental in the formation of its stress unit at was also interviewed.

In addition, nearly all of the officers who currently serve as stress responders for the Massachusetts State Police (Ed Lee, Dick Walsh, Gill Bernard, Alyce Risteen, Rick Brown) and two from the early days (Phil Trapasso and Dick Kelly) were interviewed as was that organization's commander, Col. John DiFava. There was a total of thirteen individuals, including the two commanders, who participated in this study.

Essentially, questions were constructed which were aimed at obtaining the personal and professional impressions and opinions of those field officers regarding key aspects of their job.

The Worcester Massachusetts Police Department, is a large municipal department of approximately 450 uniformed officers. The Massachusetts

State Police, a force which employs approximately 3,000 men and women ranks as one of the largest agencies in the country.

As a group of officers, they are a senior lot, and their police experience ranges from ten to thirty-two years, averaging over twenty. Their peer counseling experience ranged from three to twenty years, with over a ten year average. Five of the respondent peers had been recipients of assistance from a peer counselor for personal issues prior to their work in their respective units, and all had at least their share of traumatic exposures both on and off the job.

The work they did covers the period from 1977 to the present (2001) and represents nearly the complete roster of those who provided such services for central and western Massachusetts and much of the work delivered in the eastern sections of the Commonwealth. They come from the largest police agencies in the state (indeed, only the largest departments provide such services). There were some variations in how the programs were structured within the departments and differing levels of administrative support, but the work was remarkably similar. The work of the peer is to be approachable, available, and willing to be with fellow officers at the worst times in their lives.

Although not empirically based, these interviews hold extremely valuable information about who these responders are, the work they do, and their inside impressions of the world in which they live. The lessons they present offer a look unavailable anywhere else. It is our belief that this book can be of interest and benefit to practicing peers (both official and unofficial), police administrators and supervisors, family members, and clients that have been served or those that are in need.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to those stress unit peer counselors and their commanders without whose generous participation this book would not have been possible: from the Worcester Police Department, Chief Edward Gardella (ret.), William McClune, John Mahan, William Gilbert, and Jack Germain, from the Massachusetts State Police, Col. John DiFava, Ed Lee, Richard Walsh, Gill Barnard, Alyce Risteen, and Rick Brown.

My heartfelt thanks and appreciation to my wife, Karen, my children, and my grandchildren, whose love and support make so much possible; my coauthor, Richard Kelly, whose insight, diligence, humor and friendship made the writing of this book an enriching personal, as well as intellectual, journey; Patricia Kelly, whose insight and compelling contributions to this work were inestimable; Captain Philip Trapasso (Ret.) for his additional effort in providing an understanding of the nature of the work of stress unit peer counselors; my friend and colleague, Dr. Joanne Jozefowski, with whom discussions about the "writing life" and the Phoenix Phenomena always leave me inspired; my research assistant Rodrigo Barahona; the Chandler Associates team of colleagues and friends whose work together with me conducting psychological services for police and provide a constant and comforting reference point; my daughter, Kara, and son, Mathew, my sister, Diane Surrette, my niece, Natalia, Bill McClune, Carol Botty, and Ed Gardella.

Dr. Theodore Laquercia, mentor, colleague, and friend–his unfailing professional expertise and appreciation of the complexities of the police experience has been invaluable; Dr. Phyllis Meadow has provided me innumerable opportunities to be present, both during this project and before, and Dr. June Bernstein has enabled me to do so.

And I express my gratitude to my parents, John and Mary, gone now, but here yet in all I do.

J.M.M.

For me there are none more deserving of thanks than the many people who worked this vineyard of police stress as helper and helped–particularly in those dark days when the mere mention of support brought both denial and vehement, angry rejection. To mention all is impossible, and it is troubling to not mention even one. I hope that the hearts injured by omission will remain kind and secure in the grace they have received from giving of themselves for others.

I offer my gratitude to my Stress Unit co-workers, Bill Murphy and John "Iggie" Shannon, for their sharing of the load over the years–and especially to my first and longest partner Phil Trapasso for his work and for being a friend through some of the best and some of the worst moments of my professional and personal life.

I extend a personal thanks to retired Lt. John Meagher of the Massachusetts State Police, wherever you are, who tended to me on a dark night as a peer counselor in the days when the title didn't exist and without even knowing how much he helped.

The folks of the State Police who bravely held together and focused on the cause of getting the Stress Unit off the ground in a hostile world were Maj. John Nielson, Fr. John "Smokey's Sky Pilot" Hartigan, Al Wazalewski, and Troopers Jack Gumbleton, Dick Whitehead, and Frank Ardita. Keeping the program and the concept aloft was only possible through the hearts and labors of Paul "Doc" Murphy, Commissioner Frank Trabucco, Col. Jim Canty, Lt. Col. Bill McCabe, Sgt. "Big John" Riorden, Tpr. Leo "Doc" Dalbec, Lt. Robert Lynch (ret.), S/Sgt. Dick Whelan, and Fr. Jerry Walsh. My hat is off to those still in the trenches in today's unit and in particular to my friend of heart and soul, Gill Bernard.

For the thousands of officers and their families of the Commonwealth's police, fire and corrections departments, their care was ably and lovingly provided by vineyard workers: Peter Cove (Corrections and beyond), Charlie Wright (Belmont PD), Joe Ravino (Boston PD), Don Keenan (Boston PD), Jack Mahoney (MDC), Neal Braverman (Boston EMS), Bill Ostiguy (Boston FD), Jack Cavanaugh (Boston FD), Jack Brophy (Brockton PD), Ron Clark (CSP), and Dave Goldstein (NHSP).

The hard work of psychotherapy was provided by a cadre of mental health professionals who truly cared about emergency service folks, were always willing, and were usually underpaid. They served as therapist to the troops and their families and as mentor and friend to me. They are Drs. Leo Polizoti, Peter Smith, Susan Hamilton, and Mary Jo Smrekar.

Worthy of note for watching our backsides and providing thousands of hours of good counsel to the stressed minions are a couple of lawyers who fully took their clients to heart–Tim Burke and Ed Reardon.

I also want to thank my co-author, John Madonna, for his competent treatment of the police psychological wounded all these years and for wanting to spread the word further through this book. Working with him has been an honor and a pleasure.

And for me personally, my support comes from my wife Pat and son Rene. As with Beth, Kerri-Ann and Liam in the early days, they share the burden placed on family that the work of care imposes in lost time and intrusion into the home. In addition, Pat continually feeds my soul and my head with her words, her example, and her prayers. When spirit and career led me to the U.S. Marshals Service I found another loving work family, and in particular the Health and Safety Team and an extraordinary group of peers in the Critical Incident Response Team.

With the preceding list assembled, it is easy to hold hope for the future and to understand why so much has been accomplished. The work is plentiful and the workers continue to come to the field.

R.E.K.

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Part IV–Case Accounts

Part V–Retrospective-Prospective

TREATING POLICE STRESS

I am with you
friend
in the tempest
and long dark stillness
into day.

And
in the striving
soul-sweat
searching
finding you
brother
I have been found.

Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victims faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis.

Judith Lewis Herman

Part I

OVERVIEW

This section offers a wider look at the world in which peer counselors operate. The first chapter gives an up-to-date synopsis of the underlying theory about what makes policing stressful. Chapter 2 provides an insider's view of the history of present day stress units and peer support in central Massachusetts. The third chapter is a 1983 investigative report for a major Boston daily newspaper on police stress. It shows the problem from the officer's view, and its words, still hold true today. The final chapter focuses on the vital sub-section of police peer work, traumatic incident response, and ultimately became the framework for internal policy for several agencies.

Introduction to Policing

The two young men were from the same home town and didn't know each other, but they would both be proudly headed to the police academy in a few short weeks. One was an outsider to the world of policing—naive and enthusiastic, but knowing nothing of policing beyond receiving a motor vehicle citation. The other was from a police family. He had been raised surrounded by police officers and it was one of the family friends, a gruff old sergeant from the destination agency who was willing to talk to the boys and give them a few tips before D-Day at the academy.

They all met at a local bar, of course, where the price of drinks suited a working man's budget. They sat in a booth with the boys on one side and the Sarge on the other. Even just a few years later the younger ones would know better what alcohol could do to a man. They would be able to see how police years can be unkind and how alcohol can be a sinister, demanding, friend. They may have been able to identify an active blackout in the making. But they didn't know any of that then.

The three had only been talking and drinking for a short time by barroom standards, less than an hour. And it did seem odd when the Sarge put his head down on the table—but he picked it up in less time than it took for the younger men to even think they might have to do something about it. But when the Sarge got up he wasn't the same. He had a strange look in his eyes. It was a mixture of confusion and anger. He looked across the table and said starkly, "Who the fuck are you?"

The younger man quickly said, "Hey Sarge, you remember me—don't you?" He continued with a rapid recount of the family tree and all of the common friends and relatives. There seemed to be some recognition, but the anger was still in his eyes. Then there came the sound of a heavy metal object thumped up against the underside of the table, and with his right arm hidden to the elbow under the table, the Sarge said,"I don't know who the fuck you two are, but if you move I'm going to blow you away!"

Blessed naiveté protected the would be police officers from fully realizing the danger they were in, but they knew enough to know they needed help. With a repeated stream of names that the Sarge recognized and an amazingly accepted request to go to the men's room, one of the hostages left. He showed the good sense that would carry with him in his career by immediately getting to a telephone to summon his uncle.

With twenty years of policing behind him and an intimate knowledge of the Sarge's alcohol induced blackouts, the uncle arrived at the bar in shorter time than the laws of physics should have allowed. Luckily the Sarge responded to him, and the evening ended with one of those incongruous combinations of abruptness, contrived normality, and unspoken words—unspoken forever.

In those days, the cops took care of their own. Sadly, neither the public or the departments would tolerate officers with any visible problems, whether in recovery or not. So the problems were kept out of sight and in darkness where they festered. In the course of those two new officers careers, amazingly pursued in spite of their unique introduction, the methods used to treat troubled officers would change drastically, but they would still take care of their own. The naive one went on years later to be a peer counselor. Strangely enough memories of old Sarge played very little part in the motivation, but in the years that followed, doing the work of caring for other Sarges, his memory came back.

R.E.K.

Chapter 1

THE ANATOMY OF POLICE STRESS

John Madonna

In this book we will hear the stories of stress unit responders from two large law enforcement agencies. Combined, their agencies represent well over 3,000 employees and perform the full range of police functions from rural patrol to urban law enforcement. Any one of these officers is apt to experience, in the course of the performance of their duty, an incident which is traumatizing to them–that is, an adverse psychological reaction (and its somatic consequences) to extraordinary acute or chronic stimulation which exceeds the individual's ability to cope (Denton, 1993).

Those incidents can include the direct, sudden involvement in aggressive acts that jeopardize their lives and/or the lives of others–in which injury or death could result. Shootings and other armed and unarmed assaults constitute the extreme instances. Direct involvement in accidents and catastrophes, natural and otherwise, constitutes a vast additional category in which trauma can be sustained.

Police work, according to Territo and Vetter (1988), is one of the few professions in which an individual is expected to regularly confront the potential for physical harm, even death, and must make crucial decisions in extremely pressured circumstances. In fact, every year in America police officers are killed in the line of duty. In the year 2000 there were over 150 such deaths, an increase of 12.7 percent from 1999 (The National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund and the Concerns of Police Survivors, 2000). Many more are injured as a result of their involvement in such incidents.

Short of direct and immediate involvement, the secondary witness of injury and/or death of others can have a profoundly disturbing effect on officers. Being called, for example, to a multiple highway fatality in which children