



Dealing With Law Enforcement Stress – The Old Fashioned Way

by Gary Bush, Executive Director and Co-Founder of BACKING the BADGE

Let me say right up front that dealing with stress the old fashioned way in the course of an LEO's career doesn't necessarily work out so well. Those of you who have been "on the job" for 20 years or more will understand what I'm talking about. "Back in the day" (around 1978 for me) there were many of the same stressors that LEO's today must face. Back then, if an officer was involved in a traumatic event, or maybe cumulative stress that really affected him or her, the LAST thing you would do is discuss it with your supervisor. You might have a discussion privately with a fellow officer if you really trusted them. As a young rookie officer, I did not want to portray an image of being weak or not being able to handle the job in front of my fellow officers. Around the locker room, that was the kiss of death. The usual attitude then was, "Suck it up, that's what you signed up for. Don't be a wimp."

I had never heard of CISM or Peer Support, so I didn't really have any kind of support system in place. I wasn't much of a church goer and I didn't have a spouse at the time. So how did I deal with the stress back then? Probably the same way many of you did. I just kept it bottled up. I mean after all, sleepless nights, heavy drinking, loss of appetite and other side effects as a result of traumatic events were normal responses, right? On occasion, some of my trusted co-workers and I would engage in "choir practice" after shift, which might or might not have involved alcohol. I even came very close to becoming an alcoholic. Now obviously, this type of behavior is not healthy, is not productive, and could very well be destructive. To your career. The only positive from this type of behavior is that it allowed me and some of my peers to "talk" about things but overall the negatives far outweighed the positives. I knew something was going on with me, I just didn't know what. I was one of the lucky ones, because I got through it.

Fast forward to now. Today, the modern law enforcement officer is better trained, better informed, and better equipped than the officers of yesteryear. Ah, but those pesky stressors are still there, just as they were many years ago. Fortunately, most law enforcement administrators recognize the need of maintaining their officers' wellness as much as maintaining their training. In addition to protecting their investment (how much does it cost these days to hire an officer, train them, equip them, and get them on the street) a well-balanced officer is more productive, takes less sick time and is generally healthier. And stands a much better chance of successfully completing his or her career.

There are many more tools available to officers today to help them maintain balance. Some of these could be Critical Incident Stress Management, Peer Support Services, counseling, coaching, or just a support system. Use them. Have your career be PART of your life, rather than having your career BE your life. Stay safe.