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**Coping with the Psychological Impact of COVID-19, Protests, Riots, Anti Police Attitudes and Other Current Events on Officers and Their Families**

Law enforcement officers are having to deal with a series of challenges that seem to all be coming together in a perfect storm. The first challenge involved working and staying healthy in a time of the COVID-19 Pandemic. The second challenge was created when an officer's action resulted in some tragic outcomes. The third challenge developed when protests turned to rioting and looting. The fourth challenge involves the national negativism perpetrated, probably by a small contingent of individuals, towards law enforcement officers. The unintended consequences of these challenges have created a '**Guilt by Occupation**'. Because of the actions of a few officers all law enforcement officers are now stereotyped.

The psychological footprint of these events has created a variety of reactions and concerns for the officers and their families. The first ramification occurs when officers are assisting and responding to the demonstrations. Officers need to be in a state of controlled hypervigilance, allowing the protestors to exercise their rights to demonstrate while trying to protect people and property. In addition, officers are also having to be concerned for their own safety. This attitude towards law enforcement has also created problems for the officers when responding to routine calls as they are at times faced with negative attitudes and behaviors from the individuals that are present on scene. The latest stressor for the law enforcement offices is the movement to either disband or defund police. This movement, in some locations, involves the local government agreeing with that movement. This movement has also caused officers and their families to feel unsupported or that 'no one has their back'. Being proud to be in law enforcement is either fading or having to be hidden in the background. In some situations, family members are instructed to not broadcast that their spouse/significant other is in law enforcement.

**OFFICER SYMPTOMS AND REACTIONS**

Symptoms for the officers can be numerous and diverse. As was just noted, hypervigilance both on and off the job can become pervasive. The hypervigilance coupled with the long working hours can create both mental and physical exhaustion. The combination of these two symptoms can then

progress into Anticipatory Anxiety which officers have a thought process of ‘waiting for the other shoe to drop’. The other main symptom is characterized by both a thought and a feeling of ‘not having time to bleed’ because the officer is constantly worrying about what is going to happen next to him/her either at work or at home. This thought process then leads to the officer not utilizing his/her coping skills or self-care techniques. The other occurring symptoms can be sleep disturbances, irritability, anger, hopelessness, depression, etc.

### **FAMILY MEMBERS SYMPTOMS AND REACTIONS**

The biggest symptom experienced by family members center around a shattering of their comfort and safety zones. Home may no longer be perceived as a safe and relaxing place because of the ‘Guilt by Occupation’. That fear may be focused on themselves, their children, or their significant other. Adult family members may also find themselves being confronted by friends and strangers when they find out that there is an officer in the family. This potential may cause family members to either feel defensive a lot or just trying to avoid others. Children, if they are allowed to watch too much TV or social media may also develop feeling of fear and anxiety. There may also be a sense of loss as families may feel the need to hide the fact that they are part of the law enforcement community. What may have been a sign of pride can become a sense of embarrassment or a trigger for a fear response. Officers may feel pressure from their family to ‘get out of the profession’. As a result, the officer may feel pulled in two different directions. The one direction would be the commitment to the career and the second direction may would be the commitment to the family.

### **WHAT TO DO**

This next section will provide a series of coping techniques for the officers and their family members. It is important, however, to realize that relief and a return to normalcy cannot be achieved immediately or by utilizing only one or a few techniques. In addition to your own effective coping techniques please add some of the techniques from the below list.

### **COPING STRATEGIES FOR THE OFFICER:**

- Do not worry alone, talk about your feeling with other
- Utilize resources such as your friends, other family members, your church, psychological services, or peer support

- Develop specific 'Rules of Engagement' on what to do when fear or other emotions get too extreme
- Give yourself permission to relax and have fun
- Do not eliminate your past effective coping techniques
- With children, talk with them about their fears and come up with an age-appropriate solution
- When everything seems to feel out of control, spend time on things you do have control over
- If your fear is intensifying, develop a 'What if' thought process where you take the fearful thought and develop a solution for mitigation.
- Practice tactical breathing

#### **COPING STRATEGIES FOR THE SPOUSE/PARTNER/SIGNIFICANT OTHER:**

- Do not worry alone, talk about your fears and feelings with your spouse/partner
- Utilize other resources
- Monitor your social media presence
- Consider starting or attending a Spouses or Partner support group
- Maintain control of those parts of your life you can control
- Minimize news media viewing
- Take personal precautions to be safe at home or other places
- Do not feel you have to defend your spouse's/partner's career to individuals that question the occupation
- Maintain your normal coping strategies

#### **COPING STRATEGIES FOR CHILDREN:**

- Listen to your children's concerns. Hear them out so their anxiety does not build and cause more issues
- Validate their feelings even they are not a huge deal in your eyes. What they feel is real to them, so do not just dismiss
- Provide reassurance and help them feel they are not alone

- Encourage them to engage in healthy coping skills to address their anxiety or fear
- Help them focus on what they can control
- Limit their media exposure
- Remind them not everyone dislikes cops. Steer them away from words like “all people, never, always
- Remind them that you all are in this together as a family and you will take care of them and keep them safe
- If their problems or concerns do not improve consider getting them psychological assistance.

**EVALUATING SYMPTOM SEVERITY AND IMPROVEMENT**--When evaluating your individual problems, it is important to keep several factors in mind in terms of symptom presentation:

- **Frequency**-how often do the symptoms occur
- **Duration**-how long do the symptoms last
- **Intensity/Severity**-how vivid or strong are the symptoms
- **Interference**-to what degree do the symptoms create problems in your functioning or become apparent to others (family, co-workers, etc.)
- **Deviations from baseline**-Objectively evaluate what you were like before the events and what you are like now. If you or someone you trust notes that you are “acting different” or “not like yourself” this should alert your attention.

**SURVIVAL INVOLVES DOING WHAT EVER POSITIVE ACTION IT TAKES TO KEEP GOING**

**DON'T WORRY ALONE THERE ARE PLENTY OF RESOURCES AND PEOPLE THAT ARE WILLING TO HELP**