Silent suffering: Preventing law enforcement suicide

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**Mark Bond**Wednesday, March 26, 2014

Preventing police suicide is every officer's responsibility. The law enforcement profession can no longer ignore the silent suffering.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is real and is a lot more common among first responders than initial indications. However, the silence of the first responder culture has kept the problems associated with PTSD as [a profession secret not openly discussed](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23750758).

[A 2013 study](http://www.omicsonline.com/open-access/currentissue-international-journal-of-emergency-mental-health-and-human-resilience.pdf) by Andrew F. O'Hara et al in the International Journal of Emergency Mental Health and Human Resilience showed that in police culture, suicide is not openly discussed because police officers view suicide as dishonorable to the profession. [Additional research on PTSD](http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/mcb/181/2013/00000036/00000001/art00005) has linked the increase of suicidal behavior to those who suffer from PTSD. Officers suffering from PTSD are at a higher risk of suicidal ideation.

The O'Hara study focused on police suicides for the years 2008, 2009 and 2012. Here are some of the statistical data from their study.

* 2008 police suicides: 141
* 2009 police suicides: 143
* 2012 police suicides: 126

Profile of police suicides in the study:

* The average age of officers in 2012 was 42 at time of suicide
* The average time on job as a police officer at the time of suicide was 16 years of service
* 91 percent of suicides were by male officers
* The age in which police officers were most at risk was 40 to 44
* The time on the job when police officers are most at risk was 15 to 19 years of service
* 63 percent of police suicide victims were single
* 11 percent of police suicide victims were military veterans
* Firearms were used in 91.5 percent of police suicides
* 83 percent of the police officers had personal problems prior to the suicide
* 11 percent of the police officers committing suicide had legal problems pending
* California and New York had the highest reported police suicides

The O'Hara study has provided some key indicators from the statistical data. By analyzing the study, law enforcement agencies can build a police officer suicide prevention program by establishing a profile of potential at-risk officers and intervene with proactive mental health intervention and department support.

Mark H. Chae and Douglas J. Boyle have researched critical warning signs that a police officer is having suicidal ideations. By recognizing these signs combined with the statistical data in the O'Hara study, law enforcement has the research evidence necessary to develop a proactive suicide prevention program that can make a difference.

Some warning signs are if the officer ...

* is talking about suicide or death, and even glorifying death.
* is giving direct verbal cues, such as "I wish I were dead," and "I am going to end it all."
* is giving less direct verbal cues, such as "What's the point of living?", "Soon you won't have to worry about me" and "Who cares if I'm dead, anyway?"
* is now self-isolating from friends and family.
* is expressing the belief that life is meaningless or hopeless.
* starts giving away cherished possessions.
* is exhibiting a sudden and unexplained improvement in mood after being depressed or withdrawn. This is a dangerous sign because the officer has come to terms with his/her own death and is relieved the end is near.
* is neglecting his or her appearance and hygiene.
* is annoyed that he/she is going to do something that will ruin his/her career, but doesn't care.
* is openly discussing that he/she feels out of control.
* displays behavior changes that include appearing hostile, blaming, argumentative and insubordinate or appear passive, defeated and hopeless.
* develops a morbid interest in suicide or homicide.
* indicates that he/she is feeling overwhelmed and cannot find solutions to his/her problems.
* is asking another officer to keep his/her weapon.
* is out of character by inappropriately use or displaying a weapon unnecessarily.
* exhibits reckless behavior; taking unnecessary risks on the job and/or in his/her personal life. The officer acting like he/she has a death wish.
* is carrying weapons in a reckless unsafe manner.
* exhibits deteriorating job performance.
* has recent issues with alcohol and/or drugs.

Preventing police suicide is every officer's responsibility and obligation as a member of the law enforcement profession. Having the leadership and courage to change a culture of silence does not weaken the profession but strengthens the bonds that make it noble and honorable profession that protects the weak and innocent from harm.

The ethical warrior leads by example and supports others when they are down, and that includes their own.

Here are two additional resources on preventing police suicide:

* [The Badge of Life](http://www.badgeoflife.com/)
* [Police Suicide Prevention and Awareness](http://www.suicide.org/police-suicide-prevention-and-awareness.html)