

Strengthening Your Emotional Body Armor:

Tips to Manage the Human Condition of Trauma

Barbara A. Schwartz

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Long before officers wore Kevlar, they put on emotional body armor, heaping on more and more layers when investigating crimes against children.

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Dr. Vincent Henry, a retired NYPD officer and author of *Death Work: Police, Trauma, and the Psychology of Survival*, admits that law enforcement has done a poor job in preparing officers for the emotional upheaval of the profession, and crimes against children are especially toxic.

Officers learn how to handle their emotions through the culture passed down from one generation of cops to another. Many aspects of that culture reinforce bad coping skills.

Cynicism becomes emotional armor. Pretending to not care becomes an emotional defense.

Henry states that the problem arises when "cops begin to believe they are the image they project rather than the person they really are."

Bob Delaney knows all about not being the person you really are. As a New Jersey State trooper, he spent three years undercover with the mafia. The turmoil he experienced trying to be Bob again led to the writing of two books: *Covert: My Years Infiltrating the Mob*, and *Surviving the Shadows: A Journey of Hope into Post Traumatic Stress*.

"We are in the business of trauma and we need tools to handle the trauma," Delaney explains. "It's no different than knowing how to hit a door or clear a room or investigate an accident. We have expertise in those areas and we also need expertise in handling trauma."

Cops are going to experience post-traumatic stress. Denying that, according to Delaney, is naive. How officers perceive post-traumatic stress needs to change. Delaney calls it a "human condition, not a mental illness.

It's not about what's wrong with you, it's about the wrong you experienced."

Left unchecked, post-traumatic stress can manifest into unhealthy behaviors and conditions. Delaney likens it to a balloon. If you keep adding hot air, the balloon can pop. You have to know when to let air out to keep the balloon intact.

Have you filled your balloon with anger or rage at what you can't control or change; becoming overprotective of loved ones; coming home and slamming doors and cabinets? Or the opposite, being quiet and withdrawn; jumping at loud noises or enduring panic attacks; interrogating your kids to the point they no longer talk to you; experiencing nightmares or night sweats; having disturbing images from crime scenes invade your off duty life; feeling isolated and alone like no one cares or understands you?

To let the air out of the balloon, start peeling off the layers of emotional body armor by sharing your honest feelings.

Henry goes on to explain the "nothing" syndrome. He acknowledges that, as protectors, officers want their homes to be sanctuaries, and to shield loved ones from the horrors and evils seen on the job. But this protective nature can sometimes cause fights. If an officer comes home to a spouse who senses something is wrong and replies, "Nothing," when asked about it, the spouse may know better and wonder what else the officer is hiding.

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TIPS TO PROCESS THE “Human Condition” of Trauma

1. Talk to your spouse about how you feel leaving out the gory details.
2. Henry and Delaney advocate for cops supporting cops.
3. Shed the armor. Share the pain.
4. Talk to other officers who have witnessed and experienced what you have. Open up by asking if they are okay. Henry suggests if you know an officer has a daughter the same age as the girl in the sexual assault case you are working, then ask about the connection and how that officer is dealing with it.
5. Be the catalyst for healing. Organize peer support groups. Delaney tells cops that when you put a voice behind your own pain, you validate other officers’ feelings and give them permission to voice their own.
6. Keep a journal. Write about each case or scene you make. Go beyond report writing. The act of transcribing emotions and events can discharge traumatic memories.
7. Cultivate an identity and activity beyond law enforcement.

Delaney found refuge in officiating youth basketball. In his book he explains, “The purity of the games attracted me--they were a contrast to the evil and violence that had surrounded me...I enjoyed the officiating but also that the game and my role in it gave me a sense of peace and balance. It was a kind of therapy...”

That therapy led Delaney into his second career as an NBA official where he policed Shaquille O’Neal and Michael Jordan.

Many officers become instructors because passing on their hard-won lessons gives the pain they suffered in the trenches meaning and purpose.

Find your own refuge--an activity, place, group, class.

Small traumas can accumulate over time and inflate the balloon. You don’t have to directly experience an event to react. Many Americans felt traumatic stress watching the news on September 11, 2001.

Supervisors need to recognize that post-traumatic stress may cause disciplinary issues. Look beyond the behavior to what that officer has been experiencing and dealing with. The officer may need counseling, not days off.

Delaney challenges officers to own their trauma, be responsible for letting the air out of the balloon. “We won’t eliminate post-traumatic stress, that’s not an obtainable goal, Delaney says. The goal is keeping post-traumatic stress at post-traumatic stress, and not allowing it to get to the disorder level or mental illness symptoms or suicide.”

Deflate the balloon. Turn post-traumatic stress into post-traumatic growth.

Additional books highlighting post-traumatic stress in law enforcement include: *I Love A Cop: What Police Families Need to Know* by Dr. Ellen Kirschman, and *Deadly Force Encounters: What Cops Need to Know to Mentally and Physically Prepare for and Survive a Gunfight* by Dr. Alexis Artwohl and Loren W. Christensen.



About the author:

Barbara A. Schwartz retired after 30 years with NASA in Houston where she worked in Mission Control and Astronaut Training. She is a former reserve officer serving in patrol and investigations. She has been writing about law enforcement officers since 1972 and has been a contributing feature writer for *American Police Beat* for the past 10 years. Her articles and book reviews have also appeared in *Command*, *The Tactical Edge*, *Crisis Negotiator Journal*, *The Badge & Gun*, *The Harris County Star*, *The Blues*, and *The Police News*.

Schwartz earned a degree in Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineering from Purdue University with electives in Criminal Justice and Criminology. She helped fund her education by working for the campus police department