

The Importance of the Emotional Band-Aid

Sergeant David L. Williams

Arkansas State Police

Criminal Justice Institute

School of Law Enforcement Supervision

Session XLI

April 15, 2013

Abstract

In the world of law enforcement, officers often time find themselves in high stress situations. Most of these incidents revolve around some type of life and death event, either to the officers themselves or to the citizens that they have sworn to protect and serve. When this is mentioned, most people immediately leap to the bad guy with a gun scenario or to the gunman in the local school catastrophe.

Although these unfortunate events do occur all too often in today's society, there are other situations that officers find themselves facing much more often that are merely listed as "part of the job!" Officers are trained, reminded and warned on a continual basis that they could face the ultimate life and death situation at any moment of their shift. Basically, every man, woman and child in America knows that law enforcement officers may face a deadly force situation during the course of their duties. Why do they know this, because everyone knows that it has always been considered a "part of the job." This is no secret.

Guess what? Law Enforcement officers know that it is "part of the job" too. This is often the reason that officers often portray the image of being "ten foot tall and bullet-proof." Officers are correctly taught early on in their training that public perception is very important. The proper public perception keeps the department in good standing with the people and portrays the correct image of the department as a whole. Also, this point is highly stressed in regards to officer safety. It has been documented through interviews with known cop-killers, that when faced with an officer who handles himself well, properly maintains his equipment and, ultimately, portrays the image of a highly-skilled, highly-trained law enforcement officer, even the criminals recognize this competence and, more often than not, will not engage in a violent attack towards this officer (Grossman, 2004).

A by-product from this training and the overall consensus that danger is "part of the job", often compels an officer to maintain a very high level of personal

secrecy. Officers are formally trained, field trained, reminded, up-dated, etc... that being weak will basically get them killed. When faced with a critical situation or, just as important, in the aftermath thereof, officers will often time put on the appropriate stern face and represent themselves as the tough, nothing bothers me, it's all "part of the job" professional law enforcement officer that they have been molded to be. From fear of appearing weak or vulnerable, law enforcement officers often hide their emotions and, unknowingly, bury these feelings deep within them.

This fact is frightening, or at least, it should be. The goal of this report is to establish a way to break through the barriers associated with the current mindset often forced onto officers in regards to projecting the proper image and the possible emotional side-effects that come along with not properly addressing these emotional side-effects that the "part of the job" mentality has created.

Personal Tragedy

Webster (2013) defines trauma as "a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from mental or emotional stress or physical injury." In order to adequately describe this definition and to express my deep concern for my fellow officers, I feel the best way to explain this situation is to give you a personal account of this very issue.

In September of 1993, I enthusiastically began my law enforcement career with the Prairie County Sheriff's Department. At the age of 21, I attended the Arkansas Law Enforcement Training Academy and, after a few short months, was a certified Arkansas Law Enforcement Officer. Through my training, I learned about all the different things that were considered "part of the job." I learned how to deal with high-stress, deadly force encounters and I learned the importance of projecting the proper image, both in my actions and by maintaining my

equipment and uniform. I had never been so excited in my life. It was just like I had heard so many say before, "It was in my blood!" I loved law enforcement, I loved my job and, often, I would work beyond my scheduled shift, just because I didn't want to miss anything. I am certain that anyone that has ever put on the uniform of a law enforcement officer has experienced similar feelings. Everything in my life was perfect!

After a whirl-wind romance, I was married in 1996 to my beautiful wife, Stephanie. I remember wearing my Class A uniform in the ceremony and having several fellow officers as my groomsmen. What can I say; it was "in my blood." In March of 1997, my first child was born. A beautiful wife, a brand-new baby boy and the ultimate job....once again, everything in my life was perfect!

Shortly after giving birth to our son, my 25 year old wife began experiencing unexplained health problems. We traveled back and forth to the different doctors for months trying to find the cause to her severe abdominal pains. It had to be something, but she had just given birth to a healthy baby boy and she was only 25, so nothing had prepared me for the news that was about to be delivered.

On October 15, 1997, as I knelt beside my wife in her hospital bed at St. Vincent's Hospital in Little Rock, my tragedy began. My wife, the mother to my baby boy, had been diagnosed with cancer. It was an adenocarcinoma of an unknown primary. Over the next four months, I experienced everything that I would describe in my worst nightmare. From chemotherapy, to hair loss, to uncontrollable vomiting, to colostomy bags, to preplanning a funeral, to, ultimately, the death of my wife on February 15, 1998.

Through this entire process, all I can remember is being true to my training. I never showed emotion, I never asked for help and I rejected any sympathy. I mean, I was a cop, if I couldn't handle something tragic such as this, then what would that say about me and "my image!" At the time, I thought that I was being true to myself and to my profession. In my mind, I could handle anything. Then, more stress came. Two weeks after my wife's death, I began Arkansas State Police Troop School. This training turned out to be the hardest, most difficult and mentally challenging experience that I had ever been through. All the while, I was

experiencing an indescribable amount of heartache, denial, anger and, overall, an emotional crisis. But, I kept true to my training. I didn't talk to anyone and I put on my stern face as if nothing had happened. Through it all, I finally told one person in the school about my personal issues. Almost three months after my wife's death and after many, many excruciating nights, I finally broke down to a classmate and explained my story. After an embarrassing moment of uncontrollable sobbing, I vowed that I would never reveal my story to anyone again.

I survived my troop school training and soon found myself assigned to Lonoke County working in the Highway Patrol Division. My son lived with my parents 30 miles away and I lived with a roommate in a two bedroom house with green shag carpet. My perfect life had been turned upside down in a matter of four months, but I was a trooper! To those who came into contact with me on a daily basis, I was ten-foot tall and bullet-proof. I was a troopers-trooper who caught the bad guys, walked through the blood and guts at ferocious accident scenes and I never let anyone inside my secret world. In private, I had denounced God and would, as a nightly ritual, cry myself to sleep or drink enough whiskey to place myself into a stupor, because I couldn't go to sleep. Often times, I would set in the dark in my patrol car, on-duty, and literally sob until I made myself physically sick. Was I going crazy? Why didn't I let anyone in? Why didn't I get help? In my mind, it was because I had to stay true to my profession! If I showed weakness, then I would have surely died!

After a year or so of this radical lifestyle, an angel came into my life. I reunited with my high school sweetheart, Angie, and through hours and hours of talking and crying, I was finally able to work my way out of my nightmare. I was able to control my fits of uncontrollable weeping and I was able to lay down my heavily used crutch known as "Seagram's Seven Whiskey". Although I experienced several more years of unexplained emotional break-downs, I never sought professional help. In order to preserve my status as a law enforcement officer, I was intentionally headed down a road of destruction. I didn't know how to effectively cope with my situation and I relied solely on my law enforcement training and the importance of maintaining my rock solid public appearance.

Personal Revelation

On May 20-22, 2008, I finally received the answers that I had been looking for almost 10 years earlier. During that time period, I had the opportunity to attend the NOVA Basic Crisis Response Training. This training provided me the knowledge and the skills to understand the basic human response to different types of crisis. Through this training, I realized that I had not been crazy and that I had not experienced a nervous breakdown after my wife's death. It taught me what I had done right, but more importantly, it taught me all that I had done wrong!

Since this time, I have utilized this training to help myself, but more importantly, I have used this training to assist other officers and citizens as they have coped with a crisis situation. Although I have experienced a personal crisis, this training would have a significant impact on any officer's skills in dealing with crisis situations. Based on my personal revelation, I would like to encourage all officers to receive training in Basic Crisis Response. This training not only prepares each individual with the skills necessary to adequately cope with their own crisis, but it also gives them the knowledge to help others. These skills can be used in a variety of ways by street level officers in events that they may encounter on a frequent basis, including fatal motor vehicle collisions, death notifications, suicides, etc... Not only will it allow them to help people on an emotional level, but it will allow them to understand the sometimes erratic responses they will encounter during the event itself.

NOVA Basic Crisis Response Training Overview

The National Organization for Victim Assistance (2013) states the following:

“One of the defining characteristics of a crisis is the resulting trauma. When something is unexpected, unique and overwhelming to our daily experience, that can result in traumatic reactions. It is important to recognize that traumatic reactions vary from person to person and event-to-event, based upon a number of variables.”

Based on this statement, you can see that this is not a black and white issue and that certain variables will play a part in the actual severity of the traumatic reactions displayed. Based on these observations, we may be able to educate people about common crisis reactions and focus on positive coping strategies. This is not to be utilized in place of professional therapy, but rather a first-line approach to the proper handling of a traumatic event. The events may affect law enforcement officers themselves, their peers, family or members of the public. Through this training, law enforcement officers will have another tool available to them to assist with their duties and basic understanding of traumatic events and the effects that these events have on a normal person.

NOVA (2013) further states that, “Most likely, your reactions are common. These are described as common reactions to an uncommon situation. You aren’t going crazy. You’re just dealing with trauma and trying to cope.” This statement in a nutshell explains what are goal in this situation should be. We need to educate those involved concerning the natural human reactions to uncommon events. Again, our goal is not to provide therapy or professional services, but basic first-line assistance or an “emotional band-aid.”

Our main purpose in a crisis response situation would be to (Nova 2008):

- Educate about common crisis reactions

- Provide professional/peer validation
- Defuse emotional overload cause by crisis reactions
- Focus on positive coping and rebuilding sense of safety and hope
- Provide a method for organizing thoughts about what happened
- Address what people are experiencing now and in the future, not just what they experienced during impact
- Think about what provides meaning in life today
- Affirmation that confusing reactions are not uncommon
- Reassurance that most people can cope well; encouragement to build on strengths and adaptive capacities

Elements of Crisis Intervention

Nova (2008) provides us with the essential elements of a proper crisis intervention. Through either a One-On-One Crisis Intervention or a Group Crisis Intervention, we can use the elements described below to assist us with conducting the session. We must ensure that these needs are met in order for the intervention to be deemed successful (See Figure 1) (Nova, 2008):

1. Safety and Security
2. Ventilation and Validation
3. Prediction and Preparation

Safety and Security –

Safety needs during a crisis intervention refers to the “physical” needs of those in attendance. We must make certain that their physical safety needs, medical needs and survival needs are met prior to conducting an intervention.

Security refers to the emotional needs of those in attendance. In this case we maintain and stress the importance of privacy and confidentiality of any discussion during the session. We must also provide an environment that allows the participants to experience crisis reactions with being judged.

Ventilation and Validation –

Ventilation is the act by which we allow and encourage the victim to tell about the traumatic experience by utilizing effective words, questions, listening and speaking styles. We must maintain a compassionate presence. Often the victim is encouraged to tell their story over and over. Each time, they are able to fill in the holes in their memory with additional information.

Validation is simply the confirmation that the interviewer indicates that they heard and understood what was ventilated. This process requires effective listening skills and appropriate verbal responses to assure the victim that they care.

Prediction and Preparation –

The prediction process involves pointing out the practical issues associated with the crisis. These issues could include relocation concerns, financial burdens, medical issues or anything else that is deemed relevant. Also during this process, a variety of emotional predictions are made. These include the normal emotional reactions (disbelief, anger, denial, etc...), along with the physical reactions to the crisis (immobilization, mobilization and/or exhaustion).

The preparation process is simply the way to plan in advance for the previous predictions that were made. This would involve focusing on living one day at a time. A main goal in this process would be to discuss the basic problems that would arise out of a particular crisis and explore the different options that could help eliminate them. By encouraging further ventilation, simple daily routines and a plan to deal with the memories and memorials of the event, this process would be the backbone for pointing the victim in the right direction. Also during this process, information relating to obtaining professional help would be discussed and individual referrals would be facilitated.

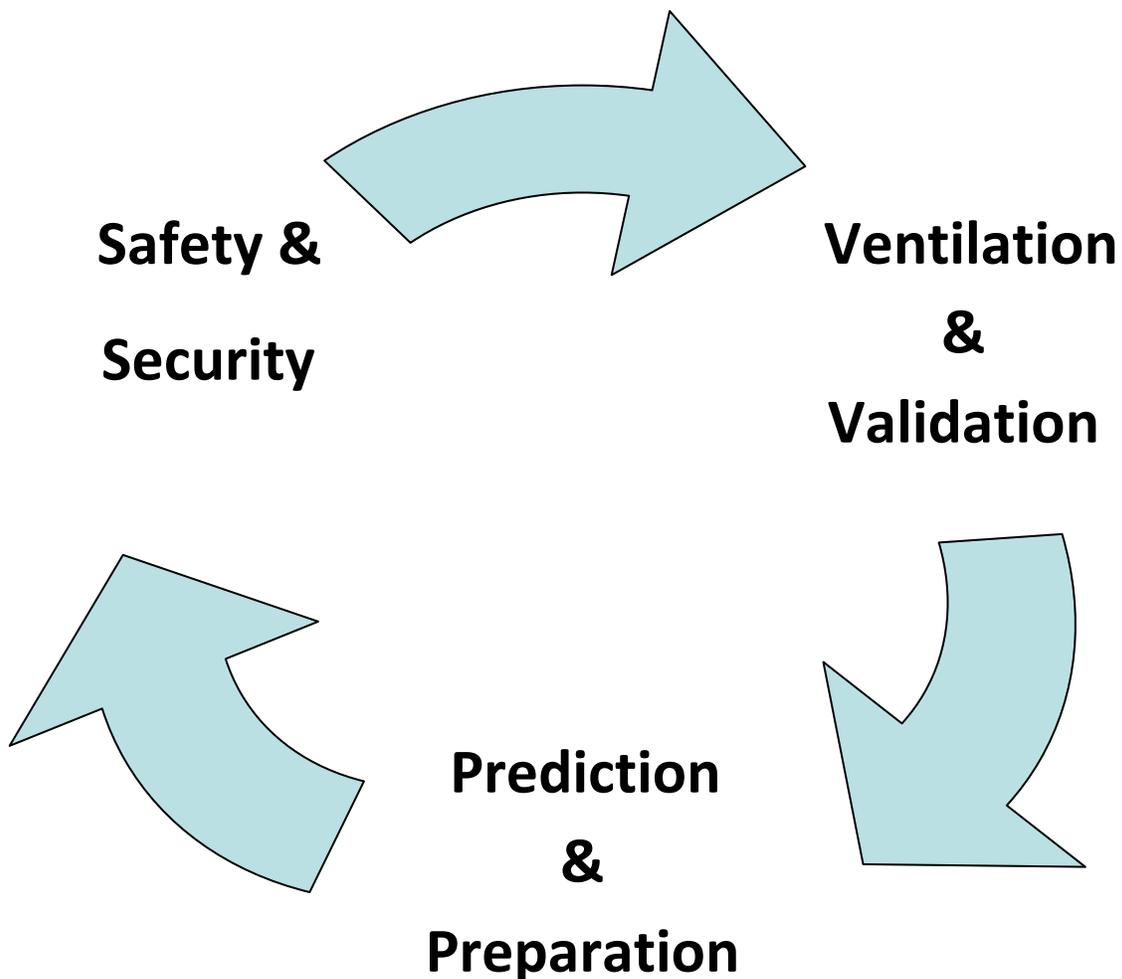


Figure 1 - NOVA Model of Community Crisis Response

Conclusion

Schroeder and Lombardo (2006) tell us that “The counseling role of a supervisor encompasses a variety of functions from instruction to personal advice. It extends from work-related details to intervention during a personal crisis.”

If law enforcement supervisors are encouraged and expected to counsel officers during periods of personal crisis, then why would we not prepare these supervisors for the task? Although supervisors are expected to do this, all officers should have the knowledge and training to deal with different types of crisis that they will face at some point during the course of their duties. Would we send our officers to a gun fight, without a gun? The answer to that question would, without a doubt, be absolutely not! Then why is it ok to send these same officers into a crisis situation without arming them with basic crisis response training?

Abraham Maslow (2013) was quoted in saying, “To the man who only has a hammer in the toolkit, every problem looks like a nail.” As this quote points out, we must equip ourselves with the proper tools for the job. Just as we would never enter a gun fight without a gun, we must also realize that we function on a daily basis in a high stress occupation that many times places us in the vicinity, either directly or indirectly, of crisis situations. Yes, this is “part of the job.” But, another aspect of the job is to help people. We cannot help people through crisis situations if we are not adequately trained to do so.

A by-product of this training should help breakdown the stern faced reactions displayed by most officers when faced with a crisis. In order to protect ourselves from the “part of the job” mentality, we must train ourselves to realize that there is an appropriate way to deal with a crisis situation. Everyone’s reactions will be different, but we have to prepare ourselves for the worst case scenario, just as we prepare ourselves for dealing with a deadly force encounter. The only difference is if we fail to prepare for a deadly force encounter, then we may die immediately. If we fail to prepare for an emotional crisis, then we may slowly die over the course of our career. Is either one ok?

Bibliography

Grossman, D. (2004). *On Combat*. Belleville: PPCT Research Publications.

Maslow, A. (n.d.). *Good Reads*. Retrieved April 15, 2013, from Good Reads:
http://www.goodreads.com/author/qoutes/4570807.Abraham_Harold_Maslow

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Trauma*. Retrieved April 15, 2013, from <http://i.word.com/dictionary/trauma>

National Organization for Victims Assistance - NOVA. (2013). *Victims of Crisis Overview*. Retrieved April 15, 2013, from <http://www.trynova.org/crisis-victim/overview/>

NOVA. (2008). *NOVA Basic Crisis Reponse Training Manual*. North Little Rock: AR-CRT.

Schroeder, D. J. (2006). Management and Supervision of Law Enforcement Personnel 4th Edition. In D. J. Schroeder, & F. Lombardo, *Management and Supervision of Law Enforcement Personnel 4th Edition* (pp. 145-161). Charlottesville: Matthew Bender & Company.