

In this blue family, no one should fight alone

“Smashing the stigma” that stops LEOs from reaching out for help when under stress should be a priority for police leaders

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Editor's Note:

Suicide is always preventable. If you are having thoughts of suicide or feeling suicidal, please call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline immediately at 800-273-8255. Counselors are also available to chat at www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org. Remember: You deserve to be supported, and it is never too late to seek help. Speak with someone today.

By Erik J. “Bo” Bourgerie

No one needs me to tell them how challenging the past two years have been for law enforcement. Between the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-police protests, and new legislation impacting police training, policies and procedures, law enforcement has experienced an unprecedented series of challenges.

This has not been easy on us as a profession, or as individuals. The stress added to each of us, on top of what is an already stressful job, can be overwhelming.



Law enforcement leaders can give no greater gift to our peace officers than to be honest, forthcoming and transparent about the challenges we face. (Getty Images)

We are losing more and more officers (active, former and retired) to suicide. We can no longer just accept these losses. There remains a stubborn stigma within our profession that seeking out help will end a peace officer's career...that seeking out help will inevitably result in being passed over for advancement...that seeking out help means one can no longer be a peace officer.

How do we overcome this cultural belief and let our peace officers know, in no uncertain terms, that when we say it is safe for them to seek help, we aren't just speaking hollow words?

Law enforcement leaders can give no greater gift to our peace officers than to be honest, forthcoming and transparent about the challenges we face. Leading by example in this area by publicly speaking about our own struggles, and seeking help for those struggles, sends the message loud and clear that anyone can struggle, seek help and still be successful in this profession. If the chief, sheriff, marshal, or command staff can seek help without repercussions, then so can line staff. There is no greater way to break the stigma and be positive examples than to lead by our own example.

I'll start:

Many people who know me don't know that I have skull tattoos covering the right side of my body, each one representing an influential friend or family member that I have lost. There are 25 in total, all telling a story, with three more to add. A number of these I lost to suicide.

The first skull represents my grandfather, who killed himself exactly one year to the day before I was born, with my birthday being the constant reminder to my family of his suicide. The second, my father, who completed suicide two weeks before my 10th birthday. A fellow scout in my troop.

Another, a fellow deputy. A probation supervisor I worked closely with. These suicides greatly impacted me, and I can honestly say that not a day passes where I don't think of them. And I cannot possibly overstate their negative impact on my life and mental health.

As friends have experienced surviving a loved one's suicide, I have tried to help them through the struggles that I have also endured. Each of them experience what I have come to think of as the "insidious contagion of suicidal ideation." A darkness envelopes them, drawing them to suicidal ideation, depression and despair. Suicide doesn't just impact the individual. The ripple of that particular stone cast in the pond of life is wide-ranging and no one close is immune to the effects.

I have struggled and fought against this darkness, and its companion depression, my entire life. Fighting against the draw of suicidal ideation has been a consistent struggle for me. And I admit to a variety of unhealthy coping mechanisms over the years. For much of my lifetime, I didn't believe I was deserving of help, but finally, I realized I was.

I started off using EAP, but kept it a secret from my agency, out of fear of the adverse impacts it would have on my livelihood and my career. Later, as a division commander, I sought counseling again but this time, decided not to hide it.

Finding the strength to seek help was the best decision I ever made. And it is likely the only reason I can share my story today. Like many, or most, of you, I have always seen myself as a strong person. I have experienced innumerable challenges in my lifetime and didn't need anyone's help in confronting and overcoming them. Although afraid at times, I found the intestinal fortitude to put myself between danger and my community, just like the rest of you. Yet, I know I only had so much internal strength to fight this battle and that it would eventually wear out, leading me to the same fate as my father and grandfather. There is honor in admitting we need help and knowing when to ask for assistance.

We must all do better. We lose too many of our brothers and sisters to suicide. Agencies have a moral obligation to support their peace officers, especially when they struggle. What peace officers are expected to deal with daily would shock and horrify the members of our communities, yet, as a profession, we have historically told our peace officers the equivalent of "rub some dirt in it" and "walk it off." I am here to say that is no longer acceptable. What follows are some suggestions for the steps police leaders can take to "smash the stigma":

HAVE HALLWAY CONVERSATIONS

Sending out emails about available resources and giving speeches concerning the need for peace officer mental health is fine, but it takes a consistent effort to convince peace officers it is OK to seek help and that they will be supported by their agency, respected for taking steps to manage their mental health, and their career can still flourish.

This is the hallway conversation with a deputy, officer, or trooper to check in with them to see how they are doing – demonstrating empathy and genuine concern – while emphasizing self-care and mental wellness.

It is leading by example by sharing our own personal struggles before asking others to do so and acknowledging that seeking mental health treatment helped us to heal. It's empowering or even requiring, first-line supervisors to individually touch base with their peace officers after a particularly difficult call.

CHECK IN AFTER TOUGH CALLS

A local police chief often relates a story about one of his peace officers who responded on a call related to a young child's death. That same peace officer was dispatched to another call, where he used excessive force, ending his law enforcement career. The chief often wonders if they could have saved that peace officer's career if they had just checked in with him and asked, "How are you doing? That must have been a tough call."

If a peace officer admits to struggling, we need to give them space to work through the trauma they experienced and to seek support if they need it. But many times, just being able to honestly debrief what they experienced and normalize their emotional response is enough to head off larger issues from developing later. And it doesn't just have to be the peace officer's supervisor. We can and should empower all peace officers to look out for each other by asking "How are you doing? That had to be rough."

DON'T REMOVE THE OFFICER FROM THE PROFESSION

We must also look at how we react when one of our peace officers is in crisis. I once heard a speaker describe the challenges they experienced while trying to "reintegrate" a peace officer who experienced PTSD. As part of their process, they took the peace officer's duty weapon and badge, the very symbols of belonging to this profession.

Many in this profession define themselves by the job. Removing this peace officer from the profession in such a profound way likely made him feel like he no longer belonged. Upon the peace officer's return to duty, the agency experienced significant issues with others accepting him back as a coworker, and with him feeling a sense of belonging.

My immediate question was, why did they create a situation to have to "reintegrate" this peace officer at all? Could the same goals have been met by assigning him to other meaningful and impactful work within the organization, while also avoiding the stigma of the "rubber gun squad"?

We must make sure that we create environments where those struggling with mental health issues are supported, kept within the fold of our law enforcement family, and are assured that asking for help will not interfere with their future. Keeping their status as "normal" as possible within the organization, including keeping their badge and weapon when the situation allows, is vital to this effort.

IMPLEMENT A FORMALIZED REINTEGRATION PROGRAM

When a peace officer must be away from the agency following a traumatic experience or due to a psychological stress injury, a formalized reintegration program is paramount to ensure they feel

confident being back at work and reconnecting with their team.

Having them ride as a two-man car for a couple of shifts, preferably with a peer support team member, can help with this process. This isn't a mini-FTO program to retrain them, but rather an opportunity for the peace officer to get back in the "swing of things" and be able to talk through their concerns with a fellow peace officer.

Fun range time, again with a peer support team member, can reduce anxiety and get them back to feeling more comfortable and "normal" with the job again.

If it was a critical incident that caused them to be away from the agency, returning to the scene for a bit to ensure they've had the opportunity to process their experience at that location can be exceedingly helpful. The goal of all of this is to normalize and celebrate the process as a way of bringing these peace officers back into the fold.

SUPPORT OUR OFFICERS' SUPPORT SYSTEMS

We cannot overlook the rest of the support system for our peace officers, their families. We often forget the stresses placed on our peace officer's spouses and children by this profession. Hosting family orientations for new hires can help prepare spouses and children for the realities of the profession and what to expect from their peace officer. Spouses and family members are likely the first to notice the signs of stress injuries if they know what to look for. Creating family support programs similar to peer support programs can help to support the families and reduce turmoil at home.

ENSURE ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Reducing barriers to obtaining mental health treatment is also important. When I searched for a mental health provider I could work with, finding an appropriate resource was a serious struggle. In my professional life, I worked with just about every mental health provider in my small community. Fortunately, I found an appropriate provider. But this is a topic law enforcement leaders should plan for, and create those relationships in advance, even if it is in a neighboring jurisdiction.

If feasible, having mental health resources embedded within the organization and easily accessible to staff, is another excellent idea. Regional peer support programs can be incredibly useful in encouraging peace officers to work through trauma, especially in smaller and rural jurisdictions.

ASSIGN A WELLNESS COORDINATOR

Whether it is a dedicated position or a collateral assignment, every agency should have a wellness coordinator who is responsible for being the conscience of the agency when it comes to ensuring employees get the kind of support needed by the command staff and the agency.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

We must realize that our peace officers will rarely ask for assistance with the mundanities of life when they are struggling. Be proactive in reaching out to them, such as asking them to meet you for a cup of coffee or a meal, or by going over to mow their lawn or buying them some groceries. These small acts can have a tremendous positive impact.

When you see a fellow peace officer struggling, do something. Don't walk away and leave them to cope on their own. Talk to them. Confront them without judgment. Guide them toward resources. Report them to their chain of command if you must but save their lives. If you need help, get it. If a buddy needs help, help them get it. No one in our family should have to fight this fight on their own.

It is OK to not be OK. But it's not OK to not seek the help you need and deserve.

OFFICER WELLNESS ACTION ITEMS FROM POLICE1

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- **Download** [Police1's eBook on prioritizing mental & emotional health](#)
- **Ask** [these five questions if you are feeling stressed](#)
- **Take** [a free online course on mental health awareness for cops](#)
- **Watch** [this on-demand webinar on how to heal stress-damaged relationships](#)
- **Listen** to the following Policing Matters podcast on promoting mental wellness in LE:



About the author

Erik J. "Bo" Bourgerie served with the Summit County (Colorado) Sheriff's Office for 20 years. During this tenure, he served as a deputy, FTO and sergeant in both the Operations and Detentions Divisions, retiring as the detention division commander. Bourgerie served on the Colorado Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) Board Arrest Control Tactics Subject Matter Expert Committee for 14 years, with the last four as the committee chairperson. Bourgerie currently serves as the Director of Colorado POST, and as the 1st Vice President for the International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards and Training (IADLEST). As a representative of IADLEST, Bourgerie was appointed to the Recruitment and Training Working

Group for the Presidential Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice and testified to the Commission regarding law enforcement training.

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