



Helping Police Families Cope

The recent shootings of police officers in our country can cause much anxiety among police families. Spouses worry about the safety of their husbands or wives, children also can be affected by current events. **The one thing that is true for all families who are worried and anxious is that they are experiencing normal responses to abnormal events.** Families can experience “vicarious trauma”, when they hear of officers being shot, seeing pictures of officers on the news and hearing about the families left behind. As uncomfortable and concerning as it is, know that this is a normal response.

Vicarious trauma unfolds over time because you care about others in the larger “police family.” You identify with their losses, you empathize with their pain. One can begin to feel overwhelmed and helpless in the face of these tragedies. Your world view changes from relative safety to one that is full of danger, especially for the police spouse.

Some common signs of vicarious trauma

- Difficulty managing emotions;
- Difficulty making decisions;
- Trying to step in and control others’ lives;
- Relationship problems;
- Physical symptoms such as aches and pains, illnesses, accidents;
- Emotional numbing.

Left unchecked, vicarious trauma can negatively affect how you interact with family and friends and the people you love.

What you can do

- Make time for yourself and your family. Watch a movie as a family; go away for some rest and relaxation.
- Limit your and your family’s time in front of the TV when police officer deaths or injuries are covered.
- Do things you find relaxing.
- Engage in activities that you enjoy.
- Stay connected to your family and friends.
- Talk about your fears as a family. It’s ok to say you are scared. It’s normal. Let the officer spouse talk about what he or she is doing to be safe while at work.
- Take moments to reflect, pray, meditate, and breathe deeply. Meditation has been proven to alleviate the effects of trauma.
- Police families can support and nurture each other and share ideas help one another cope.
- Contact a mental health professional privately or through your EAP for additional support if you feel you need it.

Adapted from Understanding and Addressing Vicarious Trauma, Dr. Laurie Anne Pearlman and Lisa McKay (2008), Headington Institute and “A Police Family Guide to Critical Incidents”, by Phyllis Pavlik Spallone, LCSW

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