Vicarious Traumatization and Spirituality in Law Enforcement

By LYNN A. TOVAR, Ed.D.

© iStockphoto.com

I t is no secret that police work causes many law enforcement officers to feel stressed. Patrol officers face the risk of violence on a daily basis, leading many people to consider law enforcement an inherently stressful occupation.[1] Also, specific duties within police departments, such as child abuse investigations, may cause more anguish than others.

Yet, the mental toll of these positions often is overlooked, and, generally, the source of this anguish is examined anecdotally rather than empirically. Law enforcement administrators need to take a closer look at how traumatic events can alter their employees' world views and senses of spirituality, which ultimately affects the well-being of both personnel and organizations.

A positive spirit can help police officers reduce work-related stress by allowing them to minimize the impact of traumatic experiences. Therefore, managers and training coordinators need to acknowledge their critical role in changing the behaviors and attitudes related to workplace stress by developing wellness and spirituality programs for their agencies. Understanding this stress, its sources and effects, and various ways to combat it will enrich officers' quality of life. Effective training programs and a culture of spirituality help officers manage

stress, respond to trauma, and lead a more satisfying life.[2]

PEOPLE-ORIENTED OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

Stress is an inevitable component of life. In our fast-paced society, individuals must respond to a barrage of problems and changes in a timely manner, take on greater responsibilities, and become increasingly more efficient at their jobs.[3] However, in addition to this common, unavoidable stress, law enforcement work presents more challenges by frequently exposing personnel to traumatic events. As a result, police work meets the definition of a "critical occupation." Personnel in critical occupations, such as firefighters, paramedics, ambulance drivers, rescue workers, and emergency medical response teams, deal with traumatic events and their consequences. Officers, along with these emergency services professionals, play a critical role to protect the community, a weighty responsibility that brings significant pressure.[4] Those who do not learn to cope with this anguish progress to a more severe stage of stress known as burnout.[5]

VICARIOUS TRAUMATIZATION

The concept of vicarious traumatization, as introduced by McCann and Pearlman,

provides a theoretical framework to understand the complicated and often painful effects of trauma on crisis workers.[6] By definition, "the effects of vicarious traumatization on an individual resemble those of traumatic experiences. They include significant disruptions in one's affect tolerance, psychological needs, beliefs about self and others, interpersonal relationships, and sensory memory, including imagery."[7]

Vicarious traumatization results from empathetic engagement with traumatic experiences.[8] Tragic events that harm innocent victims are, unfortunately, an inevitable part of our larger world and society. Because law enforcement officers hold the responsibility of responding to these incidents, they repeatedly witness human

beings' intentional cruelty to one another. As investigators listen to graphic accounts of victims' experiences and participate in reenactments of tragic events, these encounters stir powerful emotions as officers engage with victims' pain and suffering. Officers can become painfully aware of the potential for trauma in their own lives, and this empathetic engagement leaves them vulnerable to the emotional and spiritual effects of vicarious traumatization.

Officers who fall victim to vicarious traumatization may demonstrate changes in their core sense of self or psychological foundation. These alterations include shifts in the officers' identities and worldviews; their ability to manage strong feelings, maintain a positive sense of self, and connect

> *"*
> **Effective training programs and a culture of spirituality help officers manage stress, respond to trauma, and lead a more satisfying life.**
> *"*

Dr. Tovar retired as a commander from the Elk Grove Village, Illinois, Police Department and currently serves as an associate professor in the Justice, Law, and Public Safety Studies Department at Lewis University in Romeoville, Illinois.

with others; their spirituality or sense of meaning, expectation, awareness, and connection; and their basic needs for safety, self-esteem, trust, dependency, control, and intimacy.[9] These effects, which disrupt officers' professional and personal lives, are cumulative and potentially permanent.

A STUDY OF VICARIOUS TRAUMA

Focused Research

To investigate how vicarious trauma manifests in law enforcement agencies, the author studied the ways that officers deal with these painful and horrific experiences that completely contradict their previously held conceptions about how the world should be. The study examined how law enforcement officers reconcile these disruptions to their core beliefs (e.g., good versus evil, hope versus despair, safety versus vulnerability) and manage the physical, psychological, and social ramifications of vicarious trauma. The study analyzed the sources and effects of these stresses, as well as the ways in which the participants reconstructed their lives to regain their psychological and physical health. Also, the author presents suggestions on how organizations can assist police officers in their struggles, particularly

by encouraging them to learn wellness and spirituality-based coping mechanisms.

To gather this information, the author interviewed 15 law enforcement investigators from the Chicago area who worked on juvenile sexual abuse cases. She asked questions to determine how, if at all, the interviewees were influenced or changed by their professional experiences. Face-to-face interviews afforded her the opportunity to observe the participant's body language, such as

"

The concept of vicarious traumatization...provides a theoretical framework to understand the complicated and often painful effects of trauma on crisis workers.

"

eye rolls, long pauses between responses, or voice inflections that indicated contempt, concern, frustration, or sorrow. Narrative interviews illustrated to the author how various episodes, experiences, or events in officers' lives impacted their feelings, emotions, coping mechanisms, and interactions with peers and victims.

Lessons Learned

The study's results indicated that participants exhibited numerous signs of vicarious traumatization, including hypervigilance, symptomatic reactions, relationship problems, lack of communication, denial, repression, isolation and disassociation, change in worldviews, and a loss of sense of meaning. Participants' statements clearly demonstrated the impacts of juvenile sexual assault investigations in their lives. The first interviewee stated, "I think that is a part of what this job has done to me. You look at society or you look at people with a jaundiced-eye, cynical perspective. We don't always see the best, we see the worst, or we have suspicion about someone." One interviewee described the physical effects of psychological trauma, such as "headaches, the general tightness in the shoulders. I don't sleep well. I haven't slept well in a very long time. When I wake up in the morning, I never feel refreshed."

Also, as is common of vicarious traumatization victims, some subjects demonstrated significant changes to their previously held values. Another interviewee stated, "I think before I got on the job and people would ask, 'Do you believe in God?' I would say, 'Yeah, I believe in Him, but I just don't go to church.' Now

when people ask if I believe, I will say, 'If you saw what I saw—and I spent 2 hours in Children's Memorial Hospital—and if you saw what I saw... there is no God.' Yeah, I would say it has had an impact on my belief." The investigators demonstrated that their experiences permanently transformed their lives, both professionally and personally; as a result, new perspectives, new beliefs, and coping strategies emerged. Also, investigators who felt most distant from traumatic experiences were more open in their acknowledgement of their effects and more able to critically reflect on them.[10]

POSITIVE STEPS TO ACTION

These results demonstrate that law enforcement agencies must take measures to help their personnel combat the negative effects of occupational stress and vicarious tramautization. Two important methods to improve the well-being of officers include facilitating spirituality in the workplace and implementing training programs to teach coping mechanisms.

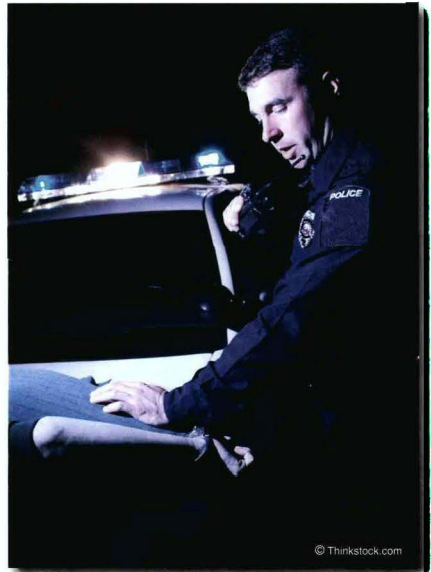### Spirituality in the Workplace

What is spirituality in the workplace? In this study, the author ascribes to a broad definition of the term. "Spirituality" does not denote religious practices, God, or theology but

rather an inherent human awareness of the elusive impact of experience. It attributes meaning to one's life through hope and idealism, connection with others, and awareness of experience. More specifically, "workplace spirituality recognizes that people have an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work in the context of community."[11]

The organization should remain concerned about how officers' work affects their inner lives and emotions and, thus, foster a culture that welcomes spirituality as a coping mechanism. The four cultural characteristics of a spiritual organization include a strong sense of purpose, trust and respect among coworkers, humanistic work practices, and the toleration of employee expression in the workplace.[12] An awareness of spirituality can shed a great deal of light on the officers' behavior in the workplace; as a result, the organizational culture that accepts spirituality can better help

employees develop to their full potential.[13]

Because many individuals desire to embrace spirituality in their personal life and in their workplace, organizations can promote a spiritual culture by emphasizing the value of community in a productive work environment.[14] Similarly, law enforcement agencies need to recognize that their employees have both a mind and a spirit, and they seek to find meaning in their duties and the community they serve. Many police officers feel the desire and commitment to connect with other humans,

© Thinkstock.com

whether inside the workplace or externally, including the citizens and victims they help. A strong sense of spirituality in the workplace promotes positive attitudes, health, happiness, empowerment, inner peace, truth, and healthy relationships.

Wellness Training

Once law enforcement administrators recognize the link between wellness and overall personnel development, they should provide training opportunities to teach officers how to cope with stress on the job. These educational programs will function as both professional and personal development for officers who suffer from vicarious traumatization.

Before administrators develop wellness programs for their departments, they should perform a two-part training needs assessment. First, managers should analyze the current state of wellness training in their agencies. Then, they must understand the severity of occupational stress among their officers. They should ask questions, such as, How has your work affected your personal identity, spirituality, sexuality, relationships, and emotional responsiveness? Does your work lead to feelings of frustration and hopelessness or to joy and accomplishment? What programs does the organization have in place to help officers deal with these changes?

After agencies gain a better understanding of their needs, they can develop educational programs to remedy these issues. Trainers should instruct officers about the causes and effects of stress, as well as constructive ways to combat it. A well-rounded stress reduction/spirituality curriculum should provide information about stress indicators, the benefits of physical exercise and proper nutrition, and effective interpersonal communication methods.[15]

❝

This training will help officers overcome stress and constructively respond to vicarious traumatization by showing them methods to incorporate wellness and spirituality into their lives.

❞

Departments should implement prevention measures by immediately educating new recruits on stress and wellness. However, continuing instruction becomes even more important for officers later in their careers; these experienced officers more likely will suffer from the effects of stress already.

As a result, agencies must provide support for their personnel, which can come in many forms. Support from the officer's agency and family is a critical factor in a troubled person's decision to seek help. Many administrators institute employee assistance programs to provide 24-hour help lines and confidential counseling.

In addition, psychological debriefings comprise an important technique to help personnel cope with traumatic events. Conducting debriefings soon after incidents allows police officers to express their feelings and discuss the occurrence in a supportive group setting.[16] Also, peer support groups allow officers who have been affected by trauma to talk to fellow law enforcement professionals who will listen to them and provide assistance. Trainers and administrators must understand, however, that many law enforcement officers fear that acknowledging such stress impacts their work and, thus, may not seek help on their own.

Last, administrators must acknowledge that each law enforcement agency is unique and has its own set of stress-related problems. It, therefore, is necessary to conduct ongoing assessments into the causes and minimization of stress among their officers.

CONCLUSION

Law enforcement officials should seek a greater understanding of the toll that work-related stress has on police officers. Organizations have begun to recognize that occupational stress and vicarious traumatization pose serious hazards for their workers' mental health; as such, they need to consider facilitating wellness and spirituality programs in the workplace.[17] These programs are positive, proactive ways to address the deeper impact of police work on officers' lives.

Training coordinators and administrators need to understand the day-to-day events of the patrol officers, specialized investigators, and other personnel who struggle with repeated exposure to trauma in their lives. Then, they can provide their employees with appropriate professional development and training opportunities to remedy these issues. This training will help officers overcome stress and constructively respond to vicarious traumatization by showing them methods to incorporate wellness and spirituality into their lives.[18]

As many law enforcement agencies across the country downsize due to budget cuts, layoffs, or attrition, it remains critical to focus on retaining effective, hardworking officers. Therefore, organizations should consider the above philosophies and approach training in a holistic manner. In a workplace where training and development foster a culture of wellness and spirituality, employees will individually and collectively begin to create, relate, and experience a richer, dynamic, and more meaningful life, both professionally and personally. ◆

Endnotes

[1] Cary A. Friedman, *Spiritual Survival for Law Enforcement* (Linden, NJ: Compass Books, 2005); Pamela A. Collins and A.C. Gibbs, "Stress in Police Officers: A Study of the Origins, Prevalance and Severity of Stress-Related Symptoms Within a County Police Force," *Occupational Medicine* (Exeter, UK: BMI Health Services, 2003); Theodore H. Blau, *Psychological Services for Law Enforcement* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1994); Dawn B. Fain and George M. McCormick,"Use of Coping Mechanisms As a Means of Stress Reduction in North Louisiana," *Journal of Police Science and Administration* 16, no. 1 (1988): 21-28; S.J. Hallet, *Trauma and Coping in Homicide and Child Sexual Abuse Detectives* (San Diego, CA: California School of Professional Psychology, 1996); M. Reiser and S.P. Greiger, "Police Officers as Victims," *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 15, no. 3 (1984): 315-323; and Terry A. Beehr, Leonor B. Johnson, and Ronie Nieva, "Occupational Stress: Coping of Police and their Spouses," *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 16 (January 1995): 3-25.

[2] Leslie H. McLean and R. Wilburn Clouse, *Stress and Burnout: An Organizational Synthesis* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University, 1991).

[3] Ava J. Senkfor and Jean M. Williams, "The Moderating Effects of Aerobic Fitness and Mental Training on Stress Reactivity," *Journal of Sport Behavior* 18 (1995): 130-57.

[4] Douglas Paton and John M. Violante, *Traumatic Stress in Critical Occupations* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publishing, 1996).

[5] Ronald J. Burke and Astrid M. Richardsen, "Stress, Burnout, and Health," in *Handbook of Stress, Medicine, and Health*, ed. Cary L. Cooper (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 1991).

[6] Lisa McCann and Laurie A. Pearlman, "Vicarious Traumatization: A Framework for Understanding the Psychological Effects of Working with Victims," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 3, no. 1 (January 1990); and B.H. Stamm, ed., *Secondary Traumatic Stress: Self-Care Issues for Clinicians, Researchers and Educators* (Lutherville, MD: Sidran Press, 1989).

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Lynn A. Tovar, "Transformation of Self: Portrait of Youth Investigators and Forensic Interviewers Exposed to Repeated Trauma," (diss., Northern Illinois University, 2002).

[11] Stephen Robbins and Timothy A. Judge, *Organizational Behavior* (Boston, MA: Prentice Hall Publishers, 2009).

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Len Tischler, "The Growing Interest in Spirituality in Business," *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 12, no. 4 (1999): 273-279.

[15] John M. Violanti, "Residuals of Police Occupational Trauma," *The Australasian Journal of Disaster and Trauma Studies* 3 (1996).

[16] Jeffrey T. Mitchell and Gray P. Bray, *Emergency Services Stress: Guidelines for Preserving the Health and Careers of Emergency Services Personnel* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990).

[17] Sukumarakurup Krishnakumar and Christopher P. Neck, "The 'What,' 'Why,' and 'How' of Spirituality in the Workplace," *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 17, no. 3 (2002): 153-164; and Jean-Claude Garcia-Zamor, "Workplace Spirituality and Organizational Performance," *Public Administration Review* 63, no. 3 (May-June 2003): 353-363.

[18] Roger E. Herman, Joyce L. Gioira, and T. Chalky,"Making Work Meaningful: Secrets of the Future-Focused Corporation," *Futurist* 32, no. 9 (1998): 24-29.