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Cumulative Stress in Law Enforcement



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"May the day perish on which I was born, and the night in which it was said, 'A male child is conceived.'" Job 3:1-3 [NKJV]

My wife and I share a very dubious distinction: Both our youngest brothers committed suicide. The circumstances were different, but the fact remains the same—they both ended their lives.

PAMELA'S STORY

Pamela's brother, a police officer, was sexually molested for several years as a young boy by a Pathfinder director. What resulted was a perfectionistic, almost manic-compulsive personality,

dressing impeccably, cleaning and washing his police car daily, maintaining and fixing his house so that it would be flawless.

In his second marriage and facing bankruptcy, the straw that broke the camel's back was when road work damaged his house beyond repair. He told no one in the family, left no note, but after his wife and her son left the house, early in the morning, he used his service gun to end his life. He was only 33-years-old.

CLAUDIO'S STORY

When Claudio's brother was seven-years-old, their dad died suddenly of a massive heart attack. In one day, the children's entire world turned upside down. Of the six siblings, two were married, one was living in the United States, and three brothers were still living at home and going to school.

Jorge, the oldest of the three boys still at home, watched their father fight for his life, and heard his pleas that Jorge not to let him die. As a college student, Jorge's friends surrounded and helped him through this traumatic experience.

Fifteen-year-old Claudio, a high school student, enjoyed the support and encouragement of friends in his neighborhood.

Their mother plunged into the depths of her grief and for that first year, for all practical purposes, three boys did not have a mother.

Pedro, the youngest brother, was the most deeply affected by his father's death. His grief over the loss of his father and the emotional absence of his mother were overwhelming. Later



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Pedro faced another life transition with a move to the United States to start a new life, in a new land, with a new language, a new culture, and within a year, a new religious faith.

After high school, Pedro joined the Air Force, got married, and had ten tumultuous years in that relationship. He then became a police officer, got a divorce, and moved in with and later married his second wife. After twelve years of challenges, discouragement, and stress in police work, he became an Air Force Reserve recruiter.

But Pedro was never happy. After a brief affair, conflict at home, and one attempted suicide, Pedro, too, used a gun to end his life. He was fifty-years-old.

TWO LIVES, SO SIMILAR

As we look back at the life of our two brothers, they had so many things in common. Two marriages, one divorce. Two children each, a boy and a girl. They were both successful and appreciated in their respective jobs.

They both worked in law enforcement, and yet, both appeared to be mostly happy on the outside. At the same time, they were both deeply traumatized and in pain for most of their life until they made their final, tragic decision, and put an end to their lives with a gun, a weapon with which they were both very familiar.

NOT ONE BIG EVENT

It was not one incident that led our brothers to the point of ending their life, but rather a series of events. Most

of us would probably be able to handle a loss, as bad or painful as it may be. What is almost overwhelming to some is a series of losses.

The Scriptures give us one of the best examples of cumulative stress in the life of Job. We read in the first chapter of the book that bears his name about his first significant loss. *“The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them, when the Sabeans raided them and took them away—indeed they have killed the servants with the edge of the sword; and I alone have escaped to tell you!”*¹

More loss followed. *“While he was still speaking, another also came and said, ‘The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them; and I alone have escaped to tell you!’”*² In one vast sweep, the Sabeans took a large part of Job’s income. The loss of income, investments, property, or savings has driven many men to despair and deep depression.

Next, Job learned of the loss of his employees, beings much more valuable emotionally than animals or property: *“While he was still speaking, another also came and said, ‘The Chaldeans formed three bands, raided the camels and took them away, yes, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; and I alone have escaped to tell you!’”*³

It is one thing to lose your employees, even if you care deeply about them, but it is another when death touches your family members. At this point in the story Job receives the worst news of all. “While he was

still speaking, another also came and said, *‘Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother’s house, and suddenly a great wind came from across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; and I alone have escaped to tell you!’*⁴

In Job’s experience, one thing added to another and another until he felt an overwhelming weight he couldn’t lift. But because of the close connection he already had with God,⁵ he turned to Him and worshipped Him⁶ so those painful losses didn’t crush him, *“And he said: ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.’”*⁷

“I’M NOT DONE WITH YOU”

One more challenge remained lurking for Job—the loss of his health. *“Satan went out from the presence of the LORD, and struck Job with painful boils*

*from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. And he took for himself a potsberd with which to scrape himself while he sat in the midst of the ashes.”*⁸

In the moment when Job most needed support and encouragement, his wife, who was probably in as much grief as he was, could not help him, but instead insisted, “curse God and die.”⁹

THE SWEET, COOLING BALM OF FRIENDSHIP

There’s nothing sweeter than the gift of friendship, particularly when we’re going through painful circumstances. Job had lost everything—property, employees, children, and even the support and encouragement of his wife. He needed someone to help him walk with him through this dark valley of pain, sickness, and despair. The Book of Job tells us that, *“when Job’s three friends heard of all this adversity that had come upon him, each one came from his own*



CAUTION CAUTION CAUTION



place—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shubite, and Zophar the Naamathite. For they had made an appointment together to come and mourn with him, and to comfort him. And when they raised their eyes from afar, and did not recognize him, they lifted their voices and wept; and each one tore his robe and sprinkled dust on his head toward heaven. So they sat down with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his grief was very great.”¹⁰

Herein lies a critical remedy for a heart that is heavy with trauma,

pain, and sorrow. Job’s friends heard of his distress, and they came to be with him. When they saw him, they cried with him. In their desire to help him, they sat with him seven days and nights. No words were spoken; they simply sat there for an entire week, kept him company, ministered to him through their presence. What a powerful lesson for us to learn. During those painful moments through which friends or loved ones may be traversing, there are no words we can say to help them feel better, but our presence, a willing ear, and a

...our presence, a willing ear, and a caring heart may be a healing balm to their troubled souls.

caring heart may be a healing balm to their troubled souls.

CUMULATIVE STRESS EFFECTS

In an FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, Sgt. Robin Klein, of the Long Beach Police Department, said, “It probably won’t be a bullet that strikes an officer down, but the effects of chronic stress.”¹¹

One of the factors associated with stress among law enforcement personnel is those incidents outside the range of normal activity. Such critical incidents may include attending to disasters (bombings, plane crashes, school shootings, multiple car accidents, etc.), witnessing death or mutilation, and dealing with abused or maltreated children. In general, police officers have rated these events as highly stressful, and yet they form part of their job, sometimes on a daily basis. While some officers may be able to deal appropriately with one or several incidents, the accumulation of these stressful events, with no intervention, can lead to severe chronic stress, PTSD, and for many, suicide.

STRESS SYMPTOMS AND MANAGEMENT

As a law enforcement chaplain, it helps to teach and recognize the symptoms of police stress. These may include headaches, fatigue, pounding heart, upset stomach, teeth grinding, backaches, muscle aches, feeling light-headed, a lower sex drive, irritability, short temper, over-eating, insomnia, restlessness, muscle tics, rashes, or excessive alcohol consumption.

Our role includes the ministry of presence, listening to them while on a ride-along, or at the police station,

and when appropriate providing them with some ideas on how they can manage their stress.

For instance, you may suggest that the officer drink plenty of water and eat healthy snacks, like fresh fruit and whole grain breads. You can also recommend that they take brief breaks from the scene, if possible, and to limit on-duty work hours to no more than 12 hours a day. A chaplain can also encourage the officer to talk about their emotions. As the officer speaks about what they have seen and done, it helps them process their feelings. This is considered part of psychological first aid. Another way to manage stress is to stay in touch with family and friends.

WE ARE NOT IMMUNE

Unlike Job, our younger brothers chose to end their lives instead of choosing to reach out to others for help. Unlike Job, they could not see beyond their pain and problems. Both of us have been able to come to terms with our brothers’ suicides. Neither of us will ever accept their choice to end their lives, and whenever we think of them, it is with great sadness. At the same time, cumulative stress can also happen to pastors and chaplains. We need to learn to recognize it in ourselves and others, and to take steps to manage it before it affects our lives, our families, and our ministries adversely.

¹Job 1:14-15, NKJV

²verse 16

³verse 17

⁴verses 18-19

⁵Job 1:1, 4-5

⁶verse 20

⁷vs. 21

⁸Job 2:7-8, NKJV

⁹vs. 9

¹⁰Job 2:11-13, NKJV

¹¹<https://www.policeone.com/archive/articles/77085-Effects-of-Traumatic-Events-on-Police-Officers/>