

Law Enforcement Officers and Trauma: The Next Public Health Crisis?

Police and corrections officers suffer higher rates of depression, PTSD, burnout and other anxiety-related mental health conditions than the general population. They should not have to suffer in silence, write three experts in trauma therapy and research.

By Susan Radcliffe, Daniel Pollack and Casey Scott

[Research](#) shows that the average lifespan of a U.S. police officer is 66 years of age. An [estimated](#) 7 percent to 19 percent meet the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

On the corrections side, the data is even more alarming. The [life expectancy](#) of a correctional officer (CO) is 59 years. Approximately 27 percent of [surveyed](#) COs have symptoms of PTSD.

For the almost [700,00 law enforcement officers \(LEOs\)](#) in the United States, these are staggering—and worrying—statistics.

They translate into rates of depression, PTSD, [burnout](#), and other anxiety-related mental health conditions that are far higher than for the general population.

Nearly [one in four police officers](#) have thoughts of suicide at some point in their lives. Approximately 75 percent of [marriages](#) in which one of the spouses is an officer end in divorce. (Nationally, the [divorce rate](#) is 40 to 50 percent.)

The anxiety-related [health problems](#) suffered by correctional officers manifest themselves in physical ailments such as chronic neck, back and knee injuries, heart disease, diabetes, high cholesterol, and hypertension, at rates even higher than those experienced by police officers.

A [2017 survey](#) of over 8,000 COs in California by Dr. Amy E. Lerman of the University of California-Berkeley revealed that 80 percent responded to at least

one violent incident while on the job, and that 48 percent feared they would be injured while on duty. Some 73 percent had witnessed someone being killed or seriously harmed during their regular duties, and 63 percent had seen or been expected to handle a dead body while at work.

Like police officers, many COs suffer in silence. Ten percent have had thoughts of suicide, and 73 percent of those officers have not told a single person about those thoughts, Dr. Lerman's survey showed. A CO's risk of [suicide](#) is 39 percent higher than the rest of the working population.

The statistics cited above should make it clear that law enforcement officers—specifically police and correctional officers—are confronting a public health crisis of escalating proportions.

And it must be addressed with the same degree of research and care that we employ in developing therapeutic interventions for other public health crises in our country. Arguably, it should be even higher on our public policy agenda, since the health of law enforcement officers has a direct impact on the communities they serve.

One way to address this issue is through education that can help police and correctional authorities, the officers themselves, and their families understand and cope with trauma.

Education about the brain is the best place to start.

Brain Science and Law Enforcement

What's happening to the brains of law enforcement officers?

Any discussion about PTSD and emotional trauma must involve the limbic system of the brain, which is responsible for emotional-behavioral responses and involves the “fight or flight responses.” It is our brains' most primitive part, and we rely on it for quick, instinctual decisions designed to protect ourselves from threat or danger.

It starts with the amygdala, the fear center of the brain. It senses the “uh-oh” feeling that something is not right, or is concerning. The amygdala then sends a message to the hypothalamus. The hypothalamus is responsible for the autonomic nervous system, which is comprised of two systems, the sympathetic and

parasympathetic nervous systems. The sympathetic nervous system is activated when a person is in a fearful situation.

This nervous system is responsible for the secretion of adrenaline and cortisol (the stress hormone), which increase heart rate and blood pressure. Alternatively, the parasympathetic nervous system is responsible for “rest and digest.” It is the system that lowers heart rate and blood pressure, and ultimately, relaxes the body.

When an officer responds to a crisis, the amygdala will send the “uh oh” message to the hypothalamus, activating the sympathetic nervous system to get the body ready for a stressful situation. Energy is focused on the threat, preparing the body for the danger of what could potentially occur. A message is sent to the pituitary gland telling it to make adrenaline and cortisol to help keep the body active and prepared for threatening situations.

Brains are supposed to have minimal bursts of these instances to give an individual the energy to handle dangerous and threatening circumstances. But the body is supposed to return to a state of “rest and digest” by activating the parasympathetic nervous system, allowing an individual to come back to a place of safety and security and homeostasis.

A law enforcement officer’s day is full of “uh oh’s,” of being in a constant state of activation of the sympathetic nervous system. Biologically, brains are not meant to handle this kind of stress day after day, week after week, year after year. So, what happens? The constant secretion of cortisol “eats away” and damages key parts of the brain.

What does a damaged brain look like?

When the amygdala and hypothalamus are damaged by excessive cortisol, the person is continuously on edge, seeing situations as threats. Also damaged is the hippocampus, the area of the brain which records new memories and helps a person retrieve them. The hippocampus is responsible for knowing the difference between past and present memories, and it helps with memories of locations, situations, objects and people.

When this part of the brain is damaged from excessive cortisol, a person is not able to remember things as easily.

The thalamus is responsible for relaying information. It takes what is seen, heard, touched, and tasted. It then takes in messages from other parts of the brain to help make sense of a situation. When excessive cortisol damages this part of the brain, perceptions become skewed. Brain attention is focused on possible threats and less energy is going to the frontal lobe of the brain where reasoning occurs.

When Cell Phones Look Like Guns

When officers are faced with a situation where they don't have the luxury of time to properly think through a decision, self-preservation becomes the only goal. Simply stated, this is how cell phones can look like guns.

Thus, the limbic system is being conditioned to be “on” and activated to respond to threats even when there are none. Constant cortisol secretion in the limbic system is the root cause of PTSD.

An officer may be irritable, grouchy, or overthinking about work issues. Sleeping and relaxing become difficult. Hypervigilance may become the norm. It should be noted that this is a very normal reaction to very abnormal working conditions. There is nothing wrong with the officer. The brain is reacting exactly how it should under years of stressful circumstances.

One anonymous police officer admitted that his temper is “heightened” at home.

“We talk about tactical considerations and how we think through things and how we react tactically, but how our brain responds to an incident and the shock and afterwards is not discussed,” he told us. “We get no training on the brain effects on us mentally.”

The good news is that damage of the limbic system can be repaired and healed. And there are alternative ways to heal the brain that don't involve medication. Trauma sensitive yoga and meditation can activate the parasympathetic nervous system and heal the limbic system of the brain.

A [2014 poll](#) shows that less than one half of one percent of law enforcement participate in yoga. Offering information regarding why such non-traditional approaches are restorative and normalizing behaviors is essential. Understanding how the brain works is a great way to help law enforcement officers improve their ability to empathize and, ultimately, to decrease violent interactions.

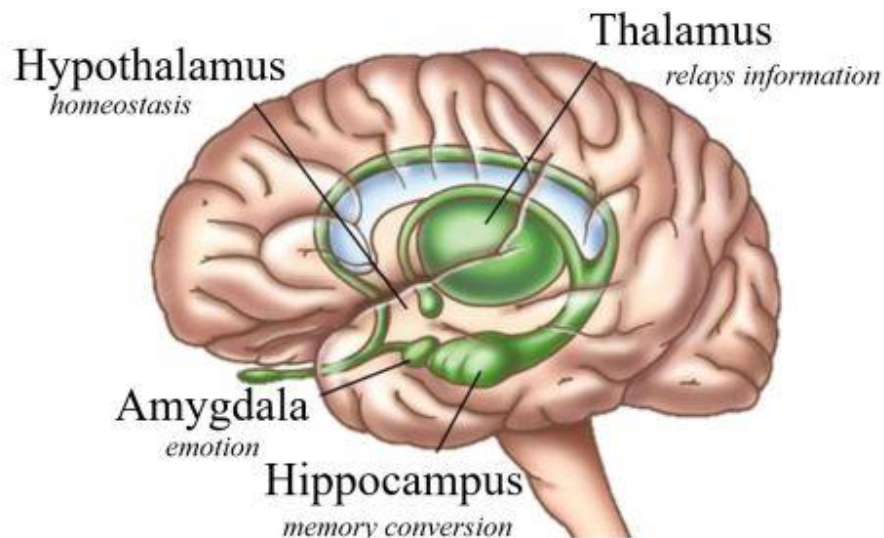
By teaching law enforcement officers to recognize the impact of prior stressful experiences on their current actions, they can better relate to the populations they serve.

See also: “Why Cops Don’t Talk About Suicide,” by **Ryan Smith**, *The Crime Report*, Feb. 19, 2021

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<https://sportslab.net.nz/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/limbic-system.jpg>

The Limbic System



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