

Thriving in Law Enforcement

forcescience.org/2021/06/thriving-in-law-enforcement

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June 10, 2021



Enter the police profession and risk higher divorce rates, alcoholism, suicide, PTSD, and early death. At least that's what they told us at the academy. I'm not convinced this is actually the case, but it is easy to believe when we watch fellow officers gain weight, lose health, drink more, sleep less, increase cynicism, and decrease job interest. We are taught that officers will be challenged just to survive the emotional toll of a law enforcement career—and that's just the way it is. *Except that it's not.*

In this article, I propose we move beyond the expectation that simply *surviving* is the best we can do. To that end, I offer habits that can dramatically increase the likelihood of surviving and *thriving* in law enforcement.

The Challenge

There is no doubt that law enforcement is challenging. In addition to the personal danger, officers can see more pain, suffering, and conscience-shocking depravity in one day than most people see in a lifetime. On top of that, it is hard to imagine another profession that falls under such enormous scrutiny from civic leaders, courts, and community groups.

Controversial media and anti-police activist groups ensure officers are followed by cameras 24-7. Every word, movement, and decision may be recorded and available for strategic editing to support false and misleading narratives. Low pay, understaffing, politicized command staff, and erratic schedules can create work conditions that leave little time for mental and physical recovery.

Although admirable, the selfless service, duty first culture of policing, coupled with the strong independence of officers, can lead to an unwillingness to accept limitations, or admit when it's time for help. In the short term, these qualities may allow officers to stay in the fight a bit longer, protect their communities for another day, or catch one more bad guy. But the benefits of selfless service can be short-lived, and the costs too great when officers fail to engage in necessary self-care.

The good news is that by committing to a habit of self-care, officers can not only survive their experiences, but they can also bring the best version of themselves to their community, their agency, and their family. In other words, they can thrive.

Habits of Health

Exercise for thirty minutes, three times per week.

Physical movement can improve mood and a sense of well-being. While exercise may not always feel great while you are doing it, the psychological health benefits are well documented. You don't have to train for a marathon or become a fitness model, simply find an activity that allows you to move your large muscle groups at a moderate pace. Aim to work out for a sustained 30-minute period, during which your exertion is greater than resting but not so great that you are gasping for air. A brisk walk is one of the best exercises we can do.

Discipline Your Eating.

Dieting is too often associated with short-term, extreme food and calorie restrictions. Instead of "dieting," commit to studying how the foods you eat can impact your energy levels and body composition. Learn how your body type and energy needs influence your dietary requirements and then discipline yourself to stay within those limits more often than not.

You do not have to resort to hyper-restrictive, impossible eating regimens. "Yo-Yo dieting" is the weight swing that results from mindlessly overeating after engaging in restrictive, unrealistic diets. It is frustrating and often leads to weight gain that exceeds any weight lost from the diet. It's not necessary to eat healthy all of the time. Instead, focus on being mindful of your eating and strike a balance between eating what you want and eating what you need. If you hit your favorite high-calorie wings spot for lunch, focus on reduced-calorie vegetables and lean meats in the evening.

Sleep for an average of 6-8 hours per night.

Sleep is critical for the proper functioning and restoration of physical and mental processes. Many of the problems experienced by law enforcement officers have been linked to sleep deprivation, including unhealthy weight management.

For many in law enforcement, getting 6-8 hours of sleep per night is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. Even so, the goal is to average those numbers over a week. If you have to be awake for an extended period, find ways to add those missing hours back into your sleep on the other days or nights. Study the science of “sleep hygiene” and set the conditions that allow you to fall asleep faster and stay asleep longer.

Engage in activities outside of law enforcement.

Police are frequently immersed in the darkest side of the human experience. It is easy to lose perspective, and that can take a toll. You must step out and enjoy the positive side of life. If you do not have hobbies outside of law enforcement, find some and focus on actively engaging yourself in these interests. Coaching kids sports may be just what you need.

Monitor your emotions and talk with the experts.

Sadness, anxiety, and depression are normal, even for police. One test for deciding when to check in with mental health professionals is whether you feel these discomforting emotions (sadness, anxiety, anger, fear, etc.) during more days of the month than not. If these feelings are persistent, think of them as you would the “check engine” light on your vehicle. Don’t wait until emotional distress becomes a formal disorder. Be proactive. If you were having shortness of breath or chest pain, you would not wait to have a heart attack before seeking help.

If possible, identify a counselor or psychologist who specializes in work with law enforcement. Be sensitive to the limits of your primary care provider and carefully consider any recommendations that you use medication. Too often, medicine is a band-aid and can prevent you from identifying and implementing the healthy lifestyle habits that lead to long-term resiliency and improved performance. Medicine certainly has its place, but it should not be your only response.

Schedule an annual consult with a police psychologist or counselor.

Be proactive. Just as you would get your teeth cleaned to avoid cavities, get in the habit of a routine “mental health cleaning.” Take time at least once a year to pause and assess your habits with a mental health professional. Ensure you are continuing to experience policing (and life) in the most productive manner possible.

Periodic health assessments can identify symptoms and risks of cumulative trauma. In addition to the effects of a single incident of trauma, an officer's psychological well-being can be impacted by the cumulative effect of repeated exposure to traumatic events. Annual consults can help ensure you are effectively managing these insidious issues.

Monitor significant conflict with your family and talk with family counseling experts.

Law enforcement work can take a toll on families. Left unnoticed, the stressors can grow until they negatively impact and degrade relationships. Law enforcement work is hard on police families. Your partner and children know the dangers you face, they know how the media portrays you on a daily basis, and they are concerned about your well-being. Ignoring the problem, hoping it simply goes away, or accepting the harm as a necessary part of the profession is no longer expected or necessary.

If family conflict threatens to get physical or you are experiencing conflict more days out of the month than not, take advantage of family counseling experts. The key is to identify the stressors and conditions that lead to conflict early. It does no good to save your community and lose your family.

Thrive

It is no longer acceptable to view the loss of families, mental health, and physical well-being as costs of serving in law enforcement. Technology and mental health strategies have advanced well beyond helping officers to simply survive their profession. Committing to simple, healthy habits, including making routine appointments with mental health professionals, ensures you're bringing the best version of yourself to your family and community. Your commitment to serving others should include a commitment to care for yourself. It's no longer enough to simply survive; it's time to thrive.

About Author

Dr. John Azar-Dickens is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist specializing in Forensic Psychology and a Certified Force Science Analyst. In addition to instructing nationally for the Force Science Institute, Dr. Azar-Dickens provides professional debriefing support and psychological assistance to officers involved in force incidents. A widely published author and active expert witness, Dr. Azar-Dickens continues to serve as a sworn patrol officer with the City of Rome, GA Police Department.

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