

Cops Find a Place to Deal with Stress

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During 28 years as a cop, I have learned many things about the hazards of policing. Most importantly, I have found that the physical dangers pale in comparison to the emotional dangers. Constant and unrelenting exposure to cruelty, violence and inhumanity have touched the souls of thousands of law enforcement officers creating fertile voids for the growth of cancerous thoughts of self-doubt and cynicism that metastasize into alcoholism, depression and suicide. Post traumatic stress disorder is slowly becoming recognized as a widespread destroyer of many police lives, yet this often terrible condition often goes ignored and undiagnosed leading to personal tragedy. As a member of one of the largest police agencies in the US, I have watched helplessly as colleagues and co-workers have succumbed to stress related disorders physically and emotionally. I've tried to lend support, but never really knew the resources that are available until recently when I learned of the existence of an extraordinary group of men and women who founded an organization known as the "West Coast Post-trauma RetreatSM, Inc." In response to my inquiry, I was sent a one page fact sheet which explains that the WCPR started in May 2001 and is affiliated with the "On Site Academy" in Gardner, MA which was founded in 1989 as the only residential program devoted to helping emergency workers recover from the effects of critical incident stress. The fact sheet went on to inform me that the WCPR is a five day intensive residential program incorporating one on one counseling, a group debriefing process, stress awareness education, substance abuse education, peer support and other therapeutic approaches as needed. Intrigued, I brought the information to our Sheriff and Director of our Police Employees Assistance Program and received their support to participate as a peer counselor and evaluate the program. What I found reaffirmed my belief that police officers are indeed caring and altruistic besides being skilled in many fields that most would find surprising.

My point of contact in making the arrangements to participate in the WCPR was Mike Poole, the Peer Director and a retired Novato, CA police officer with 30 years of street experience. His crusty irreverent sense of humor was evident in the choice words he found for the airport parking officer who threatened to tow his truck as he tried to pick me up at the "No Standing" curb of San Francisco Airport, journalistic propriety forbids me from repeating them but our rapport was instant and conversation amusing as we drove through the warm afternoon to the beautiful secluded estate where the retreat is held and where the next week would see many humorous conversations take place between Mike and I,. But there was no mistaking his dedication and commitment to the group that he had help found. "One of my best friends jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge" he told me. "There was no one to talk to". Mike went on to explain that he himself recognized the need to deal with his own job related issues and the frustration he found bouncing from therapist to therapist until he found someone who understood the police culture and he felt he could trust. Perhaps more than any

other aspect of the WCPR, I found that the driving theme amongst the staff and participants alike was that constant trust. Once we arrived and I was shown to the room that I would share with another police officer/peer counselor, I began meeting the staff. There is almost a 3 to 1 ratio of staff (which consists of psychologists, clinicians, clergy and peers) to client and the number of clients is purposely kept low to provide as much personal attention as possible. During the next 5 days, I would come to develop a deep respect for Joel Fay and Al Benner who head up the psychological counseling and clinical work as well as the other psychologists, counselors, peers and clergy.

Amazingly each and every member of the staff, volunteer the 4 times a year that the retreat is held and work tirelessly to help the police officers, fire fighters and others in the emergency services who come here looking for answers to questions that many of us must face. There were police officers who had been in shootings, fire fighters who had seen scores of death and even disaster workers haunted by the World Trade Center attacks. All from different agencies, social situations and age groups but united in their acknowledgment that their lives had been ripped apart by what they had seen and done in their service to their communities. Make no mistakes though, the staff of this retreat expected the same commitment from their clients that they themselves were willing to give. Honesty, no matter how painful, is demanded and participation in the group sessions touched everyone, peer and client alike, for without revealing that part of ourselves that lays hidden to our family and co-workers, we cannot hope to free ourselves of the burdens our experiences have placed upon us. Each client receives one on one attention from the psychologists and given batteries of testing and treatment alternatives in a safe, secure environment which is completely covered by doctor/client privilege. Amazing transitions take place during the retreats as deep seated issues are revealed to the clients, some of whom have masked these issues for years.

“We’re not into this weird mystical cosmic alignment bullshit” Dr. Benner, a retired San Francisco mounted cop told me. “We develop concrete things to do and not to do to get their lives together”. Dr. Fay, an active duty patrol officer from San Rafael California Police Department agreed “often by the time the client gets here, things seem so hopeless that they can’t do anything else. We must instill hope in people and by normalizing their reactions to their experiences through debriefing, we open the door”. Follow up is critical and before the client leaves, they have formed a 90 day plan which will be encouraged through discreet contact with the staff. By the end of the week, I had been witness to amazing displays of challenge, emotion and acceptance and clearly the majority of those who participated walked out with a greater degree of understanding and personal forgiveness than they had come in with. Perhaps Dr. Joel Fay’s reflection on the important work done at the WCPR summed it up best.

“The job does chip away at your soul. You will not walk away unscathed, but you owe it to yourselves, your family and your department to get healthy. Our priority is to get people back to a normal life. That is what we do here and I live to see the difference that we can make”.

The West Coast Post Trauma Retreatsm can be contacted at 415-721-9789

