

Getting to the core of post –traumatic stress

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Started in May 2001, the West Coast Post Trauma RetreatSM (WCPR) is a residential program, located in northern California, specifically adapted to help public safety personnel recover from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. Staffed by clinicians, many of whom have a background in law enforcement, and peers who have first-hand experience in dealing with trauma after a critical incident, the retreat provides participants with an intensive five-day program designed to restore stability and balance in a person's life.

"This is a nonprofit program that is completely staffed by volunteers," stated Al Benner, psychologist, clinical director for WCPR, and retired captain with the San Francisco Police Department. Benner explained that the fee charged for attending a session is used to defray the room and board posts associated with the retreat. Benner explained that the session, which usually begins on a Sunday and ends on a Friday, incorporates a group debriefing process, one-on-one counseling, stress awareness and substance abuse education. "The first day consists of an intensive intake process" stated Benner, "where participants interface with clinicians and peers to identify those index events that have become problematic to their lives. This intensive debriefing process is interspersed with educating participants on the physiological aspects of stress. On the second day, outside therapists join the meetings to work with the participants.

"We also include an "AA" component in the program's Benner explained, "along with a session in Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing (EMDR) that has been very successful in getting to participant to move beyond the incident" On the last day of the session, participants prepare a 90-day plan of action. "They detail how they are going to change their behavior so they can deal with their lives in positive ways," stated Benner.

Benner cites some key elements that have contributed to the success of the retreat. "The most important element in the program is that it is peer driven stated Benner. "Secondly, the fact that the program is residential forces a participant to face the incident and deal with it.

Joel Fay, a psychologist at the retreat and an officer with the San Rafael Police Department shares Benner's enthusiasm about the uniqueness of the program. "Because of the fact that three of the psychologists at the retreat are law enforcement veterans, the level of cultural competence is increased for our participant's stated Fay. Additionally: the peers who work with the participants have been through the program themselves, so they have an intimate understanding of what the participants are going through. This factor clearly differentiates our program from a traditional therapy experience where the clinician has no first hand knowledge about law enforcement

Fay also attributes the success of the program to the residential aspect that

provides participants with the time to pull the incidents apart and look at each incident separately. "By being able to look at various aspects of an incident and to come to terms with their anger, sadness or confusion participants are able to make decisions concerning their behavior and how they want to lead their lives.

A PEER PERSPECTIVE: One veteran officer and working peer for WCPR wanted to share his experience as a participant in the program. As an officer and supervisor, this peer, whom we shall call Officer Smith, had been through a number of traumatic incidents. Although he had no conscious manifestations of these incidents that he could not control, the effects of these experiences began to show up in his other people including his spouse.

After attending marriage counseling, the therapist told Smith that there were other issues that were getting in the way of the relationship. "I rejected this idea," stated Smith. "I didn't feel that there was anything else bothering me."

Eventually, however, continuous nightmares and physical symptoms of stress including an inability to cope in crowded places, led Smith to the five-day retreat in Massachusetts.

"Being an officer, it was difficult for me to make the decision to enter therapy because officers have the mindset that you should be able to handle the situation and, if you can't, then you must be weak," explained Smith. "Neither options were acceptable to me. However, after not being able to get over the feelings I was having, I finally decided to try the retreat." Three days into the therapy was the turning point for Smith. "At first I had disagreements with the program peers about what the key incident was that caused the stress. I felt certain that it was not the incident that they mentioned. I thought I had gotten over it. On the third day of the session, however, I finally came to understand the aspects of the incident that I had not been able to deal with. It was a very cathartic experience."

Smith stated that since his experience at the retreat, he no longer has nightmares, is not anxious in crowds and his relationship with his wife is on solid ground.

Smith indicated that he hoped that those reading this article, who cannot get past the traumatic incidents that they have experienced, would be able to see that it is possible to possible to regain a positive life.

For more information about WCPR call 415 721-9789.