

# THE CISM PERSPECTIVE

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## **The badge isn't a shield**

By Eric C. Weaver, Sergeant

There was no other cop tougher than my sergeant; or so he allowed everyone he knew to believe. As a SWAT and tactical team member, as well as a defensive tactics instructor, it was relatively easy for him to put on his all-around egotistical, macho, tough guy persona. The real him was the man that he didn't allow his fellow officers and supervisors to see, the man they saw was simply the man he pretended to be.

The sergeant they didn't see was the man that after nearly every tour of duty would do anything he could think of not to turn his department-issued 9mm handgun on himself.

Some of the memories that are all too fresh in my mind are of him barricading himself in his bathroom and cutting his forehead open with a key, going out to his garage and putting his gun in his mouth countless times, his wife taking his car keys away to avoid him driving and purposely slamming his car into a wall, as well as memories of him crying uncontrollably in a closet curled up in a ball for hours at a time.

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**TEACHING BALANCE...**

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## **2 years... and counting**

By Daniel J. McGuire, FAAETS, BCETS

Events in our lives, especially significant ones, will always exert a particular hold on our minds when the anniversary of the original event arrives. To some, this will be a time of avoidance. For others, it will be a time of difficult memories but they will be able to work through it nonetheless.

It's now been two years since the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001—or what I refer to as the “Pearl Harbor” of our younger generations. There were and still are an overabundance of news, radio and print stories that made their way into our lives, minds and souls. With an event like 9/11/2001, it's no wonder that we are exposed to so many remembrances and reminders of that horrible day.



For many emergency responders, this day is a holy day and one to be kept sacred in respect to the lives lost, the abrupt changes in our country and the many questions that still remain. It wasn't until very recently that the last NYFD firefighter was buried with full honors.

There is a lingering trend that is being observed across all ranks and all sizes and types of emergency services agencies. This trend is best describes as a “hanging back”—the inability to move forward and not allowing the grieving, healing and restorative actions to take place.

For many of these emergency responders, there is a sense of reverence and a general belief that if we do move forward that we will be disrespectful to those killed. It's almost as if we don't perpetually maintain the same amounts of vigilance—almost a fixation on the event and the resulting losses—then we are doing ‘it’ wrong.

This trend is preventing many of our responders from healing and getting on with life as we now have to view it, post 9/11. This is leading to many troublesome issues and is wholly affecting their lives and the ability to get back on both feet. *Continued on pg. 3*

### **Bulletproof badge con't**

This was the same tough sergeant that nobody in their right mind messed with; unfortunately the whole time he was putting on a great show for people.

As you can imagine, suffering from severe depression, which when added to tremendous cumulative stress from over a decade of very intense police work, made for a very deadly combination. Rates for depression, suicide, and stress-related illnesses among members of law enforcement are far above the national average.

Law enforcement officers need to end the macho "I can handle anything, nothing bothers me" tough guy nonsense, and start dealing with the issues that are causing the incredible suicide, divorce, alcoholism, drug use, and spousal abuse rates among police officers to climb rapidly. Although several factors contribute to these statistics, two factors often stand out among the rest.

One of these factors is the stigma associated with seeking help. Being afraid that his friends would think that he was "crazy," or that they would think less of him was one of the biggest reasons that my sergeant never sought help until it was almost too late.

Another common factor that contributes too many of these statistics is the fear of being seen as weak. There was no way that my sergeant would allow his fellow officers, especially his subordinates, to see him as weak. Unfortunately, it was only a matter of time before my sergeant was unable to act tough anymore, and he could no longer put on his act. His depression and stress brought him so desperately close to suicide that he was hospitalized six times in two years.

I have been in law enforcement for twenty years, and I have seen many officers' lives destroyed by their own reluctance to seek help. Whether it is due to the stigma associated with seeking help, the fear of being perceived as weak, or their complete denial that there is anything wrong with them, officers are slowly killing themselves, their families, their children, and everyone around them.

Because of my sergeant's denial that he needed help for so many years, he nearly lost his family as well as his own life. His wife didn't trust him, and his children were afraid of him. His family was relieved when he worked overtime because that meant that at least he wouldn't be home yelling at them.

Ask yourself, how many officers do I know who are divorced or have been married 3 or 4 times? How many do I know who are really burned out? How many do I know who are having an affair? How many do I know who seem to be

always angry and seem to hate everyone? How many do I know who drink too much after work or on their days off? How many do I know who think that going home is worse than being at work, or whose families are glad when they aren't at home? How many do I know who need to get a life outside of police work? If the answer is yes to one or more to of these questions, then there is a problem.

One very important point that needs to be made is this: you must remember that having emotions, being stressed, and not knowing how to handle life's problems in every given situation, does not make you weak or inadequate—it makes you human. More often than not, police officers have a tendency to see themselves as invincible and with the ability to be in control at all times. This feeling is understandable. As police officers, we are tasked to deal with situations that the average citizen will never encounter in their entire life. Police officers are required to control others when they cannot control themselves, as well to control violent suspects, crowds, drunks, etc. Always being in control naturally gives one a sense of power and invincibility. Unfortunately, all too often the sense of always needing to be in control continues on when the officer goes home.

It is time for officers of every rank to begin doing some very real "self-assessment." Suicide and depression rates among law enforcement must be addressed. Suicide rates among law enforcement are consistently 2-3 times higher per year than officers who are killed in the line of duty. Therefore, it is rather obvious that as law enforcement officers our most dangerous enemy is not the armed drug dealer or the suspicious driver during a traffic stop. The real enemy is the person we see in the mirror every day—ourselves.

Law enforcement officers need to say no more divorces, spousal abuse and abandoned kids; no more alcoholism; no more anger and hatred; no more bashing and ridiculing one another; no more denial and blaming others for our own problems; and no more officer suicides because of being afraid to seek help.

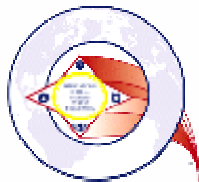
If you are feeling tired, depressed, and hopeless, you are not alone. The good news is that you can beat that feeling. My sergeant did. He is now living a successful and productive life. Please do not avoid the difficulties and problems you may be facing because (to coin a phrase), "the life you save may literally be your own."

*Eric Weaver has been a police officer and supervisor with a large metropolitan police agency in upstate New York for the past 18 years. Prior to that, he was a Corrections Deputy with a county agency for 2 years.*

*Check out these CISM websites!*

## **CISM PERSPECTIVES**

**WWW.CISMPERSPECTIVES.COM**



**International Critical Incident Stress Foundation  
(ICISF) www.icisf.org**



**The American Academy of Experts in  
Traumatic Stress  
www.aaets.org**

### **CALENDAR OF EVENTS**

**LINE OF DUTY DEATH SEMINAR,**

**ROCHESTER, NY, OCTOBER 25TH, 2003**



**“Posterity! You will never know how much it  
cost the present generation to preserve your  
freedom! I hope you will make good use of it!”  
letter to Abigail Adams, April 26, 1777 -- John  
Adams (1735-1826) Second U.S. President**

If you do see these trends in yourself or your agency, it's important that to know clearly and to believe wholeheartedly that “**moving on does not mean you are forgetting.**” Rather, moving on is a healthy act of taking up where we all were left two years ago.

Of course, it will be quite important for anyone still struggling with these issues that they get the right amount of professional mental health assistance. But, what can sometimes be equally powerful is peer-support and openness about these lingering reactions and that you may not be the only one “stuck.” ±

### **Grief and Loss survival tactics**

The loss of someone who is special to you can be a very difficult experience. When we lose someone close to us (personal family & work family) we can experience many emotions, feelings and reactions.

Some of these reactions can include shock, disbelief, denial, sadness, anger, hopelessness, personal pain, fear and at the right time, acceptance. These reactions can become intense, especially if the loss is unexpected or tragic in nature.

These feelings and reactions are to be expected, should be seen as individualized to each person, and not to be viewed as wrong if another person is not feeling or reacting the same way.

**Simply stated, “Normal people, with normal reactions to a traumatic event.”**

A sudden loss can be a particular source of increased pain, sadness and the other emotions listed above. We tend to feel guilty or partly responsible for the loss since we feel that we ‘didn’t do enough’ to help, we didn’t tell the person how we felt about them, and we regret not having more time with them.

**Some easy steps to help you move through this experience would include:**

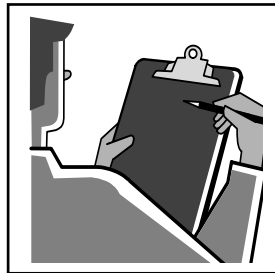
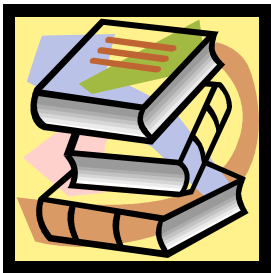
Recognize the loss and understand that it has occurred. Allow for your own feelings and emotions. This is not the time to allow others to dictate how to feel, react or what to say. Recall the times you did have with the person and find comfort in the positive experiences you have gained from knowing them. Begin to realize and accept that your life will be different without them and the workplace will be changed too.

Also realize that you will have to re-adjust to the loss and that this takes TIME! We will all process and proceed through the loss at our own pace and others may ‘bounce back’ sooner or may take longer. Individual reactions!

## RECOMMENDED READING

### **“COPING WITH POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER”**

CAROLYN AND DWAIN SIMPSON LCSW  
PUBLISHED 1997



“Whether you be man or woman you will never do anything in this world without courage. It is the greatest quality of the mind next to honor.”

James Lane Allen (1849-1925) American Author

## **Are you ready for a critical incident?**

When you are working with a company or consultant, it's significant to your success that you understand the services they are offering to you.

I have listed my consulting services for you below:

- Acute Traumatic Stress Management (ATSM) training
- CISM pre-education program design and presentation
- CISM Team design and establishment
- CISM Team support and continual education
- CISM pre-plan and program design
- Line of duty death (LODD) pre-plan and response program design
- **NEW! Terrorism, Weapons of Mass Destruction and the CISM response**
- **NEW! Motivating Emergency Responder wellness**
- **Programs flexible to your needs and budget**

**E PLURIBUS UNUM**  
**“OUT OF MANY, ONE.”**

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