

The Unspeakable Horror

Suicide In Law Enforcement

Posted: September 28th, 2008 12:01 PM EDT

JOHN WILLIS

Training Contributor

"The thought of suicide is a great source of comfort; with it a calm passage is to be made across many a bad night."

That quote by German Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche may explain the actions taken by a Chicago police officer just a couple of weeks ago. Upset about his divorce and in a fit of depression, he committed an unspeakable act - he shot his two children. His beautiful seven year old daughter died from a gunshot to the head; his little nine year old son lasted in critical condition from his head wound and then he too passed away. The officer then took his own life. He was discovered by fellow officers, lying dead from a self-inflicted gunshot to the head.



John Willis

Could this happen to your partner? Actively help to prevent it.

If you've ever answered a call like this, one in which a fellow officer has committed suicide or a murder/suicide, it's an image that is indelibly etched in your mind. It lingers; it haunts; it demonizes your psyche and it causes you to question your faith. You will never forget that scene; indeed it will become like a cancer eating away at your very core until you are forced to do something to either erase it, or at least minimize its impact on you. Some officers go down the wrong road; they turn to things like alcohol or drugs. They feel compelled to *blot it out*, to *numb* those painful recollections of an event too painful to even talk about.

Yet that's exactly what needs to be done - to talk about it. Too often we as cops put that macho-cop image out there for everyone to see. We build that wall around us, fearful of anything that might make us remember the horror. I'm talking about both guys and gals. Our sisters behind the badge see glimpses of hell as often as their male counterparts. No one is immune to the after effects of a critical incident like the suicide of a co-worker. To be involved in any way in a case like this, whether it's recovery of the body, as a negotiator, or even a dispatcher as my fellow writer Michelle Perin points out in an earlier article, leaves a hole in one's soul. That damage needs to be repaired quickly before it leads to a total change of one's own identity.

My 33 years in law enforcement brought me close to several suicides. They are one of our dirty little secrets - not many people realize how pervasive the problem is. The National Police Suicide Foundation states that an average of 450 law enforcement suicides have taken place in the last three years, yet only 2% of LE agencies have prevention programs to combat the problem. I can recall that during my tenure with the FBI, there were years when we saw the number of agent deaths by suicide larger than line of duty deaths. Whether you're a federal agent or a police officer the availability of that gun is the commonality - it's always there; it's a part of you. It makes the act of killing one's self quick and easy. We've been trained to take a life if we must, and we are confident that we can take our own - if we choose to.

But what can possibly be so bad; what depth of despair must be reached when the only answer is to end one's life? How can we not have at least one small sliver of light shining onto our otherwise blackened, uncaring soul? What causes us to sink below the water and not fight to capture that life-saving breath of air? The pragmatic answer is that there is no circumstance that will justify taking that drastic step. But we're human beings and many of us allow our emotions to control our actions. In the heat of the moment we've all done things that we later regret, said things that we're ashamed to have said. But suicide...?

I certainly do not have all the answers for the tragedy in Chicago, nor will I pass judgment on the actions that took place there. My prayers are for the babies and for the officer, and my faith tells me that God is a compassionate God. That's where I seek my comfort. But my question is this: Could it have been avoided?

According to the experts - maybe. The warning signs are usually evident: heavy drinking, a strained marriage, separation, divorce, erratic behavior; they're all visible manifestations of inner turmoil. There's a silent cry for help that needs to be answered in the form of peer counseling, professional counseling, or just a one on one talk with a partner or close friend. To dismiss the signs is to add fuel to the fire; it's not going to burn itself out. It needs to be laid out on the table, not put away in the drawer.

Intervention is a must, and simply saying "*It's going to be okay*" isn't going to help. I can guarantee that most times the effort to interject yourself into that person's life will be resisted. As a former EAP Peer Counselor I've seen it. No one likes to admit to weakness, addiction, or personal problems of any type - especially cops. We're supposed to be tough; we're immune to the horrors that would cause a normal person to faint or to flee. Try as we may to inoculate ourselves to these horrific events, we never seem to have the right dosage. We're always just on the edge of being able to totally turn off our human emotions.

While we need to shine the spotlight on prevention, we also need to shed light on the survivors of suicide - the one's left behind. Those left in the wake of a disaster like the one in Chicago, need caring for; the emergency personnel, the cops, the dispatchers, crime scene people, the hospital ER, even the coroner who deals with death each day - they all need to talk. These horrific events can have a devastating impact on someone already on the verge of developing psychological problems. To leave a vivid image unchecked may just be the trigger that sets someone into a downward spiral.

Comfort and compassion are the keys; not silence and denial. To my brothers and sisters out there I urge you to talk about this sad event. Unfortunately this is a dangerous part of our job, not unlike facing down a gunman. This is reality; this can happen to any one of us unless we're proactive and have the fortitude to face it head on. Reassuring your colleagues that sadness, tears, and other emotions are all normal is the key to mental fitness. To hold everything inside, sometimes for years, can lead to grief, depression, anxiety, and even withdrawal from friends and family. We need each other, and in times such as these it becomes even more critical that we look out for each other. I urge you to pray for Chicago Police Officer Dannie Marchan and his family.

God bless you; Stay Safe brothers and sisters!

Web Links:

- LivSafe--Stay Aware, Stay Safe!
- Michelle Perin's Article
- National Police Suicide Foundation

John Wills an ILEETA member, spent 2 years in the U.S. Army before serving 12 years with the Chicago Police Department (CPD). He left the CPD to become an FBI Special Agent, working organized crime, violent crime, and drugs. John served as the Principal Firearms Instructor, Training Coordinator, and sniper team leader in the Detroit Division for 10 years. Before retiring from the FBI, he spent 7 years teaching at the FBI Academy at Quantico, VA. He has taught Street Survival domestically and internationally. John is presently a field manager with Advanced Interactive Systems. He also owns his own business - LivSafe. He is an authorized NCAA speaker on the danger of steroids, and he maintains a blog, Red State Papa. John serves as a judge for Law Enforcement Technology magazine's Innovations Awards, helping to evaluate new products. He can be reached at john@officer.com or (540) 226-9478.

Printable version may be for personal use only. Content may not be duplicated, re-used or otherwise replicated without expressed, written consent from Officer.com and/or the original author/source.

Visit [Officer.com](http://www.officer.com) daily for the latest industry news, commentary, features and more.