

10 REASONS COPS ARE DIFFERENT

And how these differences impact on their stress!

PERHAPS IT WEIGHS only 2 ounces overall. Large ones may run to 4 ounces. But when that badge is pinned on, there is a weight unknown to most law enforcement officers. The true weight of the badge is not overcome by muscle, not found in the gym, not measured on a scale. This weight requires a strength and conditioning for which few officers are trained. The badge is not just pinned on a chest, it is pinned on a lifestyle. The heaviness of the badge makes the law enforcement officer different from other professionals. Over the course of the last ten years, working as psychologists with police officers, we have identified ten areas which make the badge heavy.

10 REASONS LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS ARE DIFFERENT

- 1) Law enforcement officers are seen as authority figures. People deal with them differently and treat them differently, even when they are not working. When a problem occurs, everyone looks to the officer to "take charge," to "solve the problem." Some say the cop is never off duty. Even when the officer is not working there is a tendency to attack problems and take charge. Sometimes taking charge is not preferable, and can cause particular strains in our world where many people like to linger with problems, never really solving anything. Recognizing the difference between a "problem solving" situation, where action is desirable, and a more passive situation, where action may alienate others, is difficult for the cop.
- 2) They are isolated. The wearing of a badge, uniform and gun makes a law officer separate from society. This segregation leads to many psychological effects which research shows can create negative personality traits. For example, psychological research shows the wearing of a uniform will tend to make any person de-humanize people who are without a uniform. Just wearing a badge or a gun can cause people to act more aggressively. These are changes that could happen to anyone wearing a uniform, badge and gun, thus these factors are expected to operate in some way on the police officer. Many officers suggest there is a "role," or "mask" which they put on along with their uniform. Sometimes this role leaks into their personal lives and changes the course of their relationships and leisure time.
- 3) Law enforcement officers work in a quasi-military, structured institution. There are mental health concerns associated with working within a "quasi-military structure" and other mental health concerns of working in an "institution." Military organizations require the sacrifice of the individual for the good of society. The "individual" is not a

consideration; the "goal" of the group is paramount. In a military organization, the focus is on punishing the individual if he is not up to standards. It is a de-humanizing process to recognize that you are only valued as a part of a machine. The 'institution' takes the same attitude, only a step further. In an institution, you are locked in a set process and the process is more important many times than, not only the individual, but also the goal. When an officer does a remarkable job of police work, perhaps even saves a life, he can still be reprimanded if he doesn't file the proper paperwork. The paperwork describing an action in many cases is more important to the institution than the action itself. Both the quasi-military nature of police work and the functioning within an institution combine for a mental health situation that is quite undesirable and very stressful.

4) Shift work is not normal. The "rotating shift" schedule is very taxing on an officer's life. Our bodies are adjusted on what is called "circadian schedules" which is a repetitive daily cycle. Our bodies like to have a regular eating time, sleeping time, waking time, etc. An officer doing shift work never gets a chance to stay on a schedule. This upsets his physical and mental balance in life. The changing work schedule also upsets the routine patterns that are needed in healthy marriage and family development. Strong marital and family development is based on rituals, like dinners together, "inside jokes," repeated activities, etc. The rotating shift worker has less chance to develop these rituals and his relationships suffer. This predisposes the officer's family to potential problems ranging from divorces, to children acting-out.

5) Camaraderie can be a two edged sword. The law enforcement job nurtures a sense of teamwork and unity with co-workers, what was once called "esprit de corps." The fraternity helps the officer on the job feel secure about getting the needed support in dangerous situations. It also stimulates a sense of belonging that can create an "us and them" view of the world. This makes the law enforcement "clique" harder to leave when retiring and makes officers more protective of each other. It also makes it more difficult to accept someone within the fraternal organization leaving or being killed. This adds to the stress of an officer.

6) Even the stress is different. Officers have a different kind of stress in their jobs, called "burst stress." Burst stress means there is not always a steady stressor, but at times, there is an immediate "burst" from low stress to a high stress state. In other words, officers go from complete calm, to high activity and pressure in one "burst." The normal stress situation for most of the rest of the work force consists of a stress building process that can be either reduced or adapted to before it gets "out of control." This is not the case for the officer, because "out of control" can happen in seconds (see "A Cop's Story" for a good example of burst stress). The law enforcement job is reactive, not proactive. Officers cannot usually control entrance

into most situations they face, unlike most people who get warnings. They have to react, not prevent problems. It is difficult to defend against burst stress.

7) The need to be in constant emotional control. Law enforcement officers have a job that requires extreme restraint under highly emotional circumstances. They are told when they are extremely excited, they have to act calm. They are told when they are nervous, they have to be in charge. They are taught to be stoic when emotional. They are to interact with the world in a role. The emotional constraint of the role takes tremendous mental energy, much more energy than expressing true emotions. When the energy drain is very strong, it may make the officer more prone to exhaustion outside of work, such as not wanting to participate in social or family life. This energy drain can also create a sense of job and social burnout.

8) No gray areas. The law enforcement officer works in a fact-based world with everything compared to written law. Right and wrong is determined by a standard. They have a set way of going about gathering the proper evidence for the law and can justify their actions because they represent the "good and right side." In the real world, clear rights and wrongs are not as likely to occur. The newspapers are an opinion-based system, the court system is an opinion-based system and, needless to say, relationship decisions and proper parenting techniques are opinion-based systems. Adjusting from right and wrong, black-and-white systems, to opinion-based systems is very difficult and requires a complete change in mental attitude.

9) The "at work" world of the officer is very negative. He sees the bad part of society - the criminal, the abuser of the rules. This may skew the officer's opinions on the character of the average human being. It creates a cynicism, a critical view of the world. It is hard to adjust to trusting a fellow human being when so much of the day is spent with people who are not trustworthy. It is hard to believe in positive intentions of people, when the day is spent with people who are intending to hurt each other. This lack of trust can show up in the way the officer deals with people on a personal level, with neighbors, with a spouse. It can even show up in the way children are raised, as police parents may tend to be stricter in discipline and more careful with privilege.

10) Even the children are effected. The children of law enforcement officers have a more difficult adjustment. As a young child, the police officer parent is seen as holding a prestigious, desirable position. The young child and his friends look up to the police officer as a minor celebrity, a person of great respect. As a teen-ager, their parent is part of the authority of society. Since teens rebel against authority anyway, this can cause a double rebellion against the parent both in their role as caretaker and as a symbol of the authority of society. Frequently, the officer's child is either overly compliant because of the rules imposed, thus causing depressive problems or

personality restriction, or the teen becomes overly rebellious of the rule-oriented parent - the best child or the worst.

As you can see, there is more to being a police officer than the training received in an academy or on the job. The work has many effects that need to be overcome so as not to effect their personal and family life. This website is designed to help you understand and overcome the effects of these other parts of the job. It is important for an officer to realize that sometimes that shield on your chest or in your pocket can be **"A Heavy Badge!"**