



# Cynical Cop Syndrome

## Don't let it happen to you

**F**or several years, I chased dope dealers in Los Angeles. Virtually living in the world of addicts and the parasites that lived off them changed me: I had become the proverbial cynical cop.

Let me tell you a quick story by way of illustration: One day, my partner, Big Mike, and I were on our way to meet an informant. As we drove up Figueroa Street, we passed a strip mall. An elderly lady was pushing a shopping cart with a few bags of groceries. I said, "See that old lady with the shopping cart? She's actually the local street pusher. Her cart is full of grass and smack!"

Big Mike snickered and replied, "You're probably right."

In the business of law enforcement, this can happen to you. You can begin to suspect *everyone* and trust *no one*. It's a byproduct of the job, but such an attitude can injure your relationships. It's a phenomenon that must be understood and addressed.

Last month in this column, I described the results of our exposure to what I call the *extremes of life*: death, tragedy, altercations. This can result in the dysfunctional defense mechanism of a permanent emotional callous. In this issue, I describe how a limited perspective increases your risk of becoming a cynical cop and how leaders can help their officers maintain a balanced perspective about the job.

### A Limited Perspective

Law officers are typically summoned when people are threatened or in some sort of danger: A child is being sexually abused; someone has been murdered; property has been stolen; a husband has assaulted his wife. We're not summoned

when things are going well. Parents don't call us to report their teenager bringing home a report card full of high grades. The opposite is true. We see people at their worst. We are regularly exposed to a limited perspective—human beings doing unlawful, improper and often despicable things. Soon, it's easy to believe that everyone is a criminal, *everyone* is a cheater and *no one* can be trusted.

The influence of this limited perspective is profound because its effects are so subtle. The skewed sample of people and circumstances coming before the officer is obvious when you think about it. But most officers don't consciously mitigate their developing assessment of humanity based on this blatantly biased exposure. Rather, they fall into an understandable pattern of cynicism and distrust.

Taken to an extreme, a cynic trusts no one. The officer's spouse, child, neighbor and friend are all subject to suspicion. This suspicion and lack of trust become obvious to those within the officer's circle of relationships. Without trust, any relationship faces an uphill battle. Yes, trust must be earned, but it's difficult to earn the trust of someone who assumes no one is trustable.

A common coping method is to withdraw from normal relationships. Officers restrict their interactions to hanging out only with others in law enforcement. They feel more comfortable with those who understand their cynicism. Some psychologists call this "in-grouping." But doing this can make matters worse.

### Overcoming a Limited Perspective

Law enforcement leaders have a responsibility to help their officers cope with this limited perspective. Officers struggling with personal relationships won't reach their full potential as

employees. They won't be effective in their contacts with the public. More importantly, they won't be happy or fulfilled as individuals.

Below, four ways officers can overcome the negative effects this limited perspective offers:

1. *Be aware:* Help your officers understand their unique situation and the obvious bias of their exposure to a one-sided sample of humanity.
2. *Increase exposure:* Encourage officers to consciously work at developing positive contacts with a broader cross-section of society. For example, coach a Little League baseball team or sponsor a scouting troop. I taught a teenage Bible study class at our church. Although there were problem people there also, it was refreshing to see most of them trying their best to become responsible.
3. *Include "outsider" friends:* True friendship requires commitment and diligent effort. Counsel your officers to include people outside of law enforcement in their inner circle.
4. *Lead by example:* Deal with your own cynicism, and lead by example.

Law enforcement is an essential element of society. It takes those who wear the badge down a perilous road, and walking that road extracts a toll. But the profession also offers great rewards to those who face the challenges realistically. —On Point **LOM**

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