

Coping Mechanisms

By Bob Vernon

Early in my career, I responded to a traffic collision call. A three-year-old toddler had chased a ball between two parked cars and out onto the street. A passing car struck him. The driver who struck him didn't even see the child. He just heard a "thump" and felt the wheels roll over something. The child was literally knocked out of his shoes and killed instantly.

New to the profession, I hadn't yet developed psychological coping mechanisms to deal with the tragedy. As a result, I experienced some shock and couldn't think clearly. When I notified the child's mother, I was carrying his shoes with me—not a wise action. Upon seeing a uniformed officer at her door with her baby's shoes, she fainted, and I had to break the latch on the screen door to get to her.

After the event, I was saddened and depressed, and kept rewinding images of that tragic situation in my mind. I even had trouble sleeping for a while. That event, along with many more during my first year on the streets, forced me to realize I would have to learn to cope with exposure to such negative events.

Tuning in vs. Turning Off

Officers face unique pressures and traumas on the job. To think clearly and get the job done, we must learn to tune in and control our emotional reaction to them, instead of shutting down. After the above incident, I became very adept at shutting off normal human reaction to traumatic events. As a result, I became callous, which affected my relationships with family, friends and neighbors.

A wake-up call: While on patrol, I received a radio call to contact the station via land line. When I called in, I was told my wife wanted to talk to me about something urgent. I was given an unfamiliar telephone number. When I made the call, a voice answered, "Lincoln Heights Receiving Hospital. May I help you?" I identified myself and was told that my wife was waiting for my call.

My wife came on the line and, with noticeable emotion, told me our two-year-old daughter had fallen against a gas jet protruding from the wall and cut her chin. She told me they would have to close the wound with stitches.

I asked how many. She replied one or two, and I said, "Hey Babe, that's no problem. What's for dinner tonight?" There was a long pause on the line. She then asked, "What did you just say?" I was so stupid that I repeated my question. Of course, she came apart, and wanted to know what kind of man I had become with no apparent feelings or concern for our daughter.

Earlier that day, I had handled a motorcycle collision in which the driver's leg was nearly ripped from his body. I had turned off my emotions after seeing such massive injury in order to be

effective and objective, instead of controlling the emotional reaction. Thus, I was emotionally shut down when speaking with my wife.

Fortunately, I realized what was happening, quickly announced I was on my way and got permission from my watch commander to go to the hospital.

Lesson learned: Officers must remember to tune in to their emotions and control them when on the job, instead of shutting down, to maintain healthy relationships with family and friends.

The Bottom Line

It's easy for officers to emotionally shut down. We have a regular diet of conflict, shocking criminal acts, misery and sadness; that's just part of the territory. Some of us make the difficult, but necessary adaptation. These officers learn how to cope with strong emotions when on the job and how to reopen their hearts when interacting with their spouses, parents, friends and children.

As a leader, you must help others realize they face awesome challenges and assist them in developing skills and coping mechanisms to transition in and out of their various roles.— On Point.

Bob Vernon retired from the Los Angeles Police Department after 37 years on the force. He earned an MBA at Pepperdine University and is a graduate of the University of Southern California's Managerial Policy Institute and the FBI's National Executive Institute. After retirement, Vernon founded The Pointman Leadership Institute (visit www.pointmanleadership.org), which offers international, principle-based ethics seminars for police agencies, parliament members, military leaders and a variety of other groups.