

The Inner Life of Cops, Firefighters and Medics

The lived experiences of First Responders and emotional, psychological and spiritual wellbeing

Introduction

Many would agree that having a balanced, positive, grounded life is not only a powerful protective factor it is a path to fully realizing the intrinsic rewards of serving others as a first responder. Yet today, much of the effort and energy of peer support, CISM and psychology departments is focused on psychological breakdown and the prevention of psychopathology *not* on living well.

If we are to focus efforts and programming and on living full, satisfying and meaningful lives as police officers, firefighters and medics where do we start? What is the path? What should peer support programs, CISM teams, chaplains and psychology departments focus on? How do we individually model living well? How do we approach issues of the heart and soul with people frustrated by shift work, poor leadership, operational struggles, political division, chronic social ills and a steady diet of people's trouble? These are the questions we must consider. ¹

Background

Throughout the ages and in every society, a small percentage of people have oriented themselves to run toward danger to keep the rest of society safe. These have been society's warrior rescuers. Today, on the home front, we collectively call these people first responders.

While *first responder* is a convenient term for lumping together law enforcement, fire and EMS, it is a poor descriptor that few like. It fails to capture the magnitude of the role and identity, the deep psychological patterning necessary to be good at the work and the distinctiveness between the various response groups. While, out of convenience, we use the term *first responder* we also use the term *warrior rescuer* to honor the significance of this role and the way in which it lives in the imagination and history.

Since 9/11, Americans have lavished praise and attention on first responders. Much of this praise and attention has been two-dimensional, framing the police officer, firefighter and medic experience as either heroic or the makings of psychological breakdown. Medics, police officers and firefighters resent this over-simplified framing because it fails to accurately reflect the fullness of their lived experience. Most first responders do not see themselves as heroic and most will not develop chronic PTSD, depression or other debilitating psychological maladies.

¹ There is much good work going on this area around the world. We do not claim our approach is wildly unique. We are simply responding to a need and our ongoing research. We are on a path of discovery together.

The leading emotional, psychological and spiritual challenge for first responders today is to find balance in fully embracing the role and everything it requires in today's environment and be able to come home to live a connected, calm, hopeful and meaning-filled life. This challenge is about realizing the initial motivational dream or calling of the role and work.

When listening closely to new police officers, firefighters or medics we find most are called to this work out of a belief that the role and work will add something positive to their lives. In choosing interesting, challenging and adventuresome work that allows them to help others they hope to find a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment. Their lives will be better for choosing the work.

While newbies often find some initial excitement and meaning, over time, the enthusiasm often fades and instead of the role and work *adding* to wellbeing, it begins to *subtract* from wellbeing. This subtraction and lack of fulfillment is attributed to a number of factors.

Police officers, medics and firefighters attribute it to the difficult work environment, the 24/7 operational demands, poor bosses, being understaffed and over worked, and a steady diet of others' misery. They also attribute this subtraction to the current social-political milieu, society's tendency to quickly blame them when things go wrong and a feeling of alienation with anyone other than their sisters and brothers in the work. The psychological community has increasingly attributed this subtraction to stress, trauma and the impact of big events.

However, in studying the *lived experience* of police officers, firefighters and medics we find these factors are not the whole story.² We find that there is a small percentage who truly thrive or flourish in their lives and work. These first responders report living full, satisfying and meaningful lives. They demonstrate key elements of wellbeing including: positive emotion; engagement and interest in their lives and work; high self-esteem; optimism; resilience; a powerful sense of agency; a sense of belonging; and positive relationships.³

Police officers, firefighters and medics who live well

Our prime curiosity is with these first responders who thrive. What makes them unique and what contributes to their wellbeing? We find them in all kinds of departments, environments and find they come from a wide variety of backgrounds. While they differ widely in age, lifestyles and how they describe and talk about their lives and work they seem to share a few commonalities.

First, they have a deep respect for the role and work and don't take it lightly. Second, they recognize and acknowledge the work has challenging emotional, psychological and

² Lived experience is a term used in qualitative and phenomenological research that seeks to deeply observe, understand and describe the subject or research participants' actual experience without bias or applying a theory or lens.

³ Wellbeing indicators have been studied at the University of Cambridge and at the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center.

spiritual demands. Third, they purposefully and proactively take measures to counter-balance the emotional, psychological and spiritual demands of the work.

Having a deep respect for the role and work is about not seeing the work simply a job or career – like any other job or career. They recognize the unique demands of a high risk, high stress and high responsibility role. They recognize the power and limitations of the role and do not let it define them. Despite the role being disrespected by society, bosses, family or friends they trust the value and necessity of what they do. It is not just a uniform or a title, it is a calling (however humble and unappreciated) that is larger and greater than themselves.

To prepare for and actually do the work of running toward danger, protecting and rescuing others requires an immersion into an emotional, psychological and spiritual orientation and commitment that suspends the natural human orientation toward self-preservation, limited stress, optimism and easy emotional feeling and expression.

Police officers, firefighters and medics imagine and prepare for the worst; they cultivate high states of readiness and vigilance. Responding requires the discipline of a calm focus while in the midst of extreme stress, chaos, danger, threat, death and horror. The first responder must wall off strong emotions, and confront violence, mortality and acute human suffering while regularly encountering and attempting to manage the social ills and the human suffering society may ignore

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Throughout history, warrior-rescuer traditions and legends⁴ have understood that the emotional, psychological and spiritual orientation and work of the warrior rescuer needs a powerful and active counter-balance. Without an appropriate counter-balance, the warrior rescuer may become cynical and separated from the society served, given to imagining the worst in everything, chronically vigilant and guarded, out of touch with emotional feeling and expression, unable to experience beauty, disconnected from people outside the brotherhood and sisterhood of the work, and hard, cold, unempathetic or even brutal in the work.

Traditional approaches understood and taught that if one was going to be a man or woman of arms or involved in the protection or care of society in attack or crisis they would get psychologically dirty. They would need an active counter-balance to the role and work to be able to come home, clean up and be a good human being.

A Counter Balance

A counter-balance includes knowledge, understanding, attitudes, study, practices and disciplines oriented toward being emotionally, psychological and spiritually healthy. When studying those who thrive and flourish we find the counter-balance shows up in six areas.

⁴ (the Homeric epics, the Roman soldier and the Stoics teachings, the Greek tr

Area 1. Engagement and disengagement with the archetypal nature of the role.

Police officers, firefighters and medics struggle to separate from their roles and work. They come home, but are not fully home. They take off the uniform, but cannot shed the psychological armor. The images, memories and stresses of work follow them to bed. In these ways, the warrior-rescuer archetype is extremely powerful. One can become fully and inseparably possessed by the warrior- rescuer identity in such a way that it detrimentally overshadows one's life.

Those who thrive have a healthy relationship with the role and identity and do not let it control their lives. They know how to appropriately engage and disengage with archetypal nature of the warrior rescuer and appropriately subordinate it to other roles in their lives. They know how to enter the archetype and be really good in their role. But they also know how to contain being a police officer, firefighter or medic.

The need is to bring the unconscious nature of the warrior-rescuer archetype into balance with the conscious mind – to integrate the role, identity and archetype into a psychological wholeness. The practices are extremely practical. They are about coming home – not just coming home to the place, space and people we consider home, but coming home to one's self and shedding the armor, uniform, badges and labels that are so necessary in running toward danger, and embracing other roles and identities and purposefully disciplining one's self to do so.

Area 2. Living with equanimity.

In running toward danger and always being prepared to run toward danger, vigilance and stress become normalized to such a degree that the warrior rescuer may lose touch with what it means to be calm. He or she may lose the ability to turn off stress.

Those who thrive acknowledge the presence of vigilance and stress and the impact of vigilance and stress on the body, mind and spirit; distinguish between dulling and calming; get clear about calm means and how it shows up in their lives; actively cultivate calm and peace in the body, mind and spirit. These practices include homecoming rituals and calming practices such as breathing exercises, aerobic exercise, mindfulness meditation, prayer, yoga, tai chi, qigong and a variety of old and new calming techniques.

Area 3. Cultivating the inner life and great self-knowledge and awareness.

The identity and work of running toward danger has the potential to undermine one's personal, moral, philosophical, spiritual and relational grounding. Sense of self, personal character, interaction with society, commitments, values, beliefs, morals and ethics are challenged in running toward danger. Working with tragedy, trauma, loss and violence often magnifies personal struggles, character issues and addictions. The work often leaves first responders with a vague sense of guilt and shame (regardless of the nobility of their actions). Victim mentality and an unnecessary martyr complex often surface when a strong sense of character is not intact.

Those who thrive focus on the need for a continual cultivation of self, character, maturity, worldview, philosophy and spiritual path. The disciplines and practices of this area include

the cultivation of an interior life (radical self-examination, study, contemplation, fasting, spiritual direction, questing, pilgrimage); engaged work on one's character, adult maturity, moral compass, addictions, childhood wounds, values, beliefs and commitments; the study of philosophy, biographies, spiritual paths and traditions; and the cultivation and use of the expressive arts.

Area 4. Cultivating and tending nutritious relationships.

A growing body of scientific research shows that positive relationships are essential to health, longevity, happiness and living. Nutritious relationships feed the soul and are foundational to resilience. First responders often struggle with relationships – especially those outside the brotherhood/ sisterhood of the work world. Deep and meaningful relationships do not come easily for first responders. The mystique around the warrior rescuer is one of self-sufficiency and bearing burdens alone. The lone hero is glorified in modern film and literature, but that same failure to connect may result in profound loneliness.

Those who thrive foster the development, cultivation, nurturing, tending and sustaining of relationships. They reject the notion that they can get along without connection and belonging. They believe relationships are essential and live as such. This area of work centers around self-awareness, emotional expression, deep listening, commitment, and the rediscovery of empathy and relationships as a mirror for growth. Also included is the essential need for guides, mentors, elders and nutritious friends.

Area 5. Holding, carrying and transforming heartbreak

While firefighters, medics and police officers rarely develop debilitating psychopathology, many will experience loss, grave disappointment, failure and witness and/or participate in difficult and heartbreaking events. Some of these events may be of a moral and spiritual nature. How these events are framed, understood and managed matters.

Today the psychology world often frames grief and heartbreak as psychological trauma without leaving room for the normal process of grief. Heartbreak is normal and illustrates our humanity. Grief is an extremely valuable process of integrating loss into one's life tapestry. Too often the teaching and processes around after-action reviews and CISM have been too heavy on breakdown, warnings about PTSD and psychopathology and not about modeling and teaching about the necessity of grief, mourning and memorialization.

Throughout history, heartbreak has been accepted as an integral part of running toward danger. Spiritual and religious traditions, literature and philosophy have prepared warriors rescuers for emotional wounding and heartbreak and helped them carry the wounds and, if possible, transform the wounds into positive change or growth. Recent study and research by psychologists, social workers and scholars in multiple traditions have shown that growth and transformation are significantly more common than breakdown and enduring psychopathology.

Those who thrive in this work accept the likelihood of heartbreak and treat it as an important part of the experience. They honor grief and its necessary and lingering work in

their lives. They understand the need for emotional expression, mourning and memorializing and recognize that the experience will not be forgotten but can be carried in ways that deepens and strengthens them.

Area 6. Cultivating context and the construction of meaning.

Integral to living well is how first responders make sense, frame, construe, understand and remember events and experiences – especially events and experiences that are tragic, defy common explanation, are morally challenging and involve loss.

Meaning-making is both an individual and social process by which an experience, event or memory finds context. Meaning is something we create, construct, derive and share. Meaning can add something positive and significant to one's life regardless of circumstances – a claim that has received considerable support in recent research. Meaning has a clear connection to resilience.

Those who thrive engage in representing, storytelling, mourning, ritualizing and mythologizing. Meaning is a construct and not necessarily easy, automatic, immediate or fixed. The activities include communal storytelling (both telling and listening); the use of ritual, mourning and memorializing; the identification and use of ritual elders; telling and connecting with the old stories and myths; and seeking and identifying insights, wisdom and gifts that emerge from the work.

Programing for living well

The above observations and concepts are not unique. They are actually ancient ideas that have ample testing down through the ages. The challenge for us today is finding ways to ensure these concepts are taught, studied, practiced and infused into our personal lives and into the way in which we work with other first responders.

This is the needed curriculum for cultivating living well and should be the backbone of our peer support, CISM and psychology programing. Programing that focuses on living well does not have the drama and pathos of programing that focuses on big events and breakdown but it will likely have much greater results.

Note: This material is part of a forthcoming book titled Running Towards Danger: The emotional, psychological and spiritual life and path of the first responder, by John Becknell PhD. Please do not copy, distribute or publish without permission. Thank you.