

# FIRST RESPONDER RESILIENCY AND WELLNESS



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First responders are human beings who deal with life stressors and then work on dealing with other people's life stressors. Compound that with their career stressors. How can we cope with all of those stressors? Simply worded... build resiliency. Resiliency helps first responders maintain flexibility and balance in their lives while dealing with stressful circumstances and traumatic events. It also helps to minimize compassion fatigue and burnout.

Resilient officers have the ability to adapt quickly in a variety of circumstances. They can quickly analyze a situation, recognize the real and potential problem areas, and react effectively. They are able to improvise and change as circumstances change. Resilient officers can stay calm and focused while being able to combine optimism with realism while finding opportunities in the most difficult circumstances.

Recognizing the need for adaption in coping skills when they are not effective anymore is resiliency. As we go through our lives, we need to adopt our coping skills to work through culminative stress. Resilience is made up of five pillars: self-awareness, mindfulness, self-care, positive relationships & purpose. By strengthening these pillars, we become more resilient and are able to adapt. Instead of experiencing an overwhelming downward spiral when we encounter stress in our lives. The five pillars work together to lift us up out of the chaos we are feeling when our coping skills are successful in moving forward and adapting.

## TRIAD OF RESILIENCY

The triad of resiliency includes psychological resilience, physical resilience, legal resilience. Survival in law enforcement is more than just getting home at the end of the day. Police officers need to consider the full spectrum of survival that includes physical, legal and psychological aspects.

## PHYSICAL RESILIENCE

The physical aspect is easy to understand and manage because there are observable and measurable standards associated with fitness and health. Police officers can set and evaluate standards. Staying fit, sleeping well, eating right and training hard prepare officers for the physical aspects of survival and are directly linked to resiliency. Regular physical fitness in the form of a hobby (racquetball, basketball, weight-lifting), presents a goal, something to look forward to and contributes to fitness.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE

The psychological aspect of survival is perhaps the most complex. It requires officers to understand the impact of excitement and performance, fear, and resiliency as it pertains to survival. One of the fundamental requirements for operational success and officer survival is to understand and control psychological excitement. Psychological resilience is moving beyond the negative effects of stressors. It is the ability to mentally and emotionally deal with a crisis or traumatic event and returning to your "normal" or your "new normal".

The primary excitement results from the exposure to a threat and provides the necessary preparatory readiness to respond. It provides increased energy and drive, and enhances alertness. Secondary excitement results from aspects not directly related to the threat such as fear, not feeling prepared, or fear of failure. The problem with the secondary excitement is that it is not mission-focused and does nothing to help mitigate the threat.

Primary excitement is a necessary component for peak performance. Having not enough excitement results in poor performance. There is a relatively short period of time for peak performance before exhaustion decreases performance. The impact or excitement levels vary from person to person and from skill to skill. Some people perform better with more excitement, whereas others need to be as relaxed as possible.

There are several factors that affect the relationship between performance and excitement. The nature of the task, complexity of task, experience with task, individual characteristics and finding the 'Zone'. It is that state where everything seems to click with very little deliberate effort. It feels good to perform when you are confident and you know what you are doing. We are most likely to find our zone when we are performing skills that are somewhere between our confidence level and somewhat challenging.

## **LEGAL RESILIENCY**

The legal aspect of survival is manageable as well. Police officers are required to demonstrate their understanding of constitutional requirements, as well as federal, state, and local laws and statutes. Officers are also required to follow established departmental standard operating procedures. By understanding and following all applicable laws, statutes and procedures officers avoid violating civil rights and protect themselves from issues of liability.

Legal survival is an important aspect of resiliency. Most officers assume that if they are involved in a deadly force encounter, their department will protect them as long as they acted in accordance with departmental policy. Most of the time that is an accurate assumption, but it is not always guaranteed. Officers must stay educated and mindful of the legal risks of the profession. Even if the department considers the officer's actions to be legal and in accordance with departmental policy, the officer is still subject to both criminal and civil rights violation charges.

An example of legal resilience is Officer Bill of Rights. It is not a constitutional amendment. Instead, it exists in various forms throughout the U.S. In some states, it has been codified into laws pertaining to public employees. In others, it has been incorporated into individual law enforcement agency policies regarding internal investigations. It has been included in some collective bargaining contracts. In all cases, police officers' bill of rights serves to help law enforcement agencies police themselves fairly and ethically. The police officers' bill of rights exists to make sure that those investigations are conducted fairly, upholding the best interests of both the department and the officer in question.

Legal resiliency entitles educating yourself on professional review procedures for your department. Understanding you are your strongest advocate. The loyalties you feel exist have a tendency to disappear when you are undergoing a formal investigation or review. Consider the peer support of an officer who has already gone through the process of having their actions formally reviewed. Don't underestimate the emotional effects caused by formal investigations and proceedings. The stress and duration of the proceedings often cause more stress than the original incident.

## **FIVE-PILLARS OF RESILIENCE**

The key is to identify ways that are likely to work well for you as part of your own personal strategy for fostering resilience. Developing resilience is a personal journey. People do not all react the same to traumatic and stressful life events. Some variation may reflect cultural differences. A person's culture might have an impact on how he or she communicates feelings and deals with adversity. The five pillars of resilience included self-care, self-awareness, mindfulness, and positive relationships & purpose.

Resilience begins with self-care. Maintain a healthy diet, exercise regularly, manage your weight, get regular health checks and understand what it takes for your body to perform with ease. Pay attention to your own needs

and feelings. Engage in activities that you enjoy and find relaxing. Look for opportunities for self-discovery and accept that change is a part of living. Part of self-care is learning from your past experiences.

Self-Awareness allows you to nurture a positive view of yourself. Developing confidence in your ability to solve problems and trusting your instincts helps build resilience. Keep things in perspective even when facing very painful events. Try to consider the stressful situation in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective. Avoid blowing the event out of proportion.

Mindfulness is being aware of your ability to maintain a hopeful outlook. An optimistic outlook enables you to expect that good things will happen in your life. Try visualizing what you want, rather than worrying about what you fear. Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems and move toward your realistic goals. Take decisive actions and act on adverse situations when you can.

Positive relationships and finding purpose are important. Making connections and developing good positive relationships with close family members, friends or others provide a solid support system. A healthy relationship creates love and trust, offer encouragement and reassurance and help bolster a person's resilience.

Resilience involves maintaining flexibility and balance in your life as you deal with stressful circumstances and traumatic events. Developing mental toughness is part of building resiliency. It includes breaking the stigma of anxiety, depression and mental illnesses that a first responder might experience during their career. The positive mentality and confidence that you develop through resiliency will help you adjust to your life and career experiences.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Mental Health America offers a free online screening to determine whether you are experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition. Mental health conditions, such as depression or anxiety, are real, common and treatable. And recovery is possible.

<https://screening.mhanational.org/screening-tools>

Tools 2 Thrive: A toolkit of materials and conducting awareness activities.

While 1 in 5 people will experience a mental illness during their lifetime, everyone faces challenges in life that can impact their mental health. In 2020, our theme of Tools 2 Thrive will provide practical tools that everyone can use to improve their mental health and increase resiliency regardless of the situations they are dealing with. We now believe that these tools – even those that may need to be adapted for the short term because of COVID-19 and social distancing – will be more useful than ever.

<https://www.mhanational.org>

Why is mindful awareness important? Another resource the VA provides.

Mindful awareness is at the heart of Whole Health. It can help you live your life more fully, with all its joys and challenges. In general, mindful awareness may:

Improve your quality of life, helping you experience more moments of your life.

Help you see things as they are and observe—but not judge—your experiences.

As a public safety first responder it is stressful to just do your job. Add CoVID 19...Talk about needing some relaxation and/or stress reliever.

Try Awareness Meditation or a short breathing exercise.

From the CDC: Tips for taking care of yourself (<https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/responders.asp>)

Sources of stress for emergency responders may include witnessing human suffering, risk of personal harm, intense workloads, life-and-death decisions, and separation from family.

Stress prevention and management is critical for responders to stay well and to continue to help in the situation. There are important steps responders should take before, during, and after an event. To take care of others, responders must be feeling well and thinking clearly.

People with preexisting mental health conditions should continue with their treatment plans during an emergency and monitor for any new symptoms. Additional information is found at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA <https://www.samhsa.gov/disaster-preparedness>)

Correctional Officers and Compassion Fatigue

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/.../correctional-officers-and...>

Have you ever wondered what the benefits of peer support are? Here is just a few.

<https://medium.com/.../10-benefits-of-peer-support-d7e2e19566...>

"First responders have many vulnerabilities because of their constant exposure to death and destruction."

<https://blogs.psychcentral.com/.../what-first-responders-tea.../>

First responders 7x more likely to have suicidal thoughts, study finds

[https://www.kmov.com/.../video\\_4739e93c-262d-5b9a-bb48-939829...](https://www.kmov.com/.../video_4739e93c-262d-5b9a-bb48-939829...)

You Can Not Pour from an Empty Cop

<https://www.lawofficer.com/you-cannot-pour-from-an-empty-c.../>

