



Mental preparation for retirement



Does the thought of retiring from police work excite you? Make you apprehensive or ambivalent? Retirement planning includes more than just thinking about financial security. Police officers have to prepare psychologically for leaving the job.

You can't wait until you are near retirement to prepare psychologically for leaving police work any more than you can wait to prepare financially. I suggest three key areas of concern: lifestyle, identity and mental health.

Lifestyle

How will you spend your time? Who will you spend your time with? Do you have non-police friends and activities?

Ongoing research indicates that some choose not to retire because they don't have anything else to do and fear boredom. They regret not mapping out a plan sooner. Having a plan for how to spend free time – whether with friends, travelling or engaging in hobbies – just makes sense. You plan your professional life so why not make plans for your personal life? Keeping a schedule of activities can help officers transition to retired life.

Identity

For some, turning in their gun and badge symbolizes giving up a part of who they are. When you retire from policing, you are a "retiree."

There isn't much that separates you from the retired dentist next door. This can be a very painful aspect of retiring from policing. Having a broad sense of identity, including recognizing the various roles you play in your personal life, can help you to manage losing your police officer identity.

Mental health

For some officers, 25 years of police service comes with a mental health cost. A

quarter century of being exposed to the trauma of others exacts a heavy toll on the psyche.

Many veteran officers have shared stories with me of witnessing terrible tragedies early in their careers, at a time when debriefing meant having a drink after the call and cracking jokes with fellow officers about what they had seen. They were then forced to move on to the next call, the next shift and so on without ever really talking about what they witnessed. They can still vividly recall the details of the event like it happened yesterday.

What happens when you don't have another call to go to? Retirement opens the space for the mind to wander toward unresolved events because you no longer have the benefit of the distractions of work or the support system that accompanies it.

This may result in vulnerability to traumatic stress disorders and depression.¹ Dr. Kevin Gilmartin warns of the "biological roller coaster" of police work, where the high cannot be sustained off the job, resulting in a dip in mood which can lead to depression, relationship problems and addictive behaviours².

The presence of these issues is complicated by the lapse in benefit coverage that typically occurs within three months of retirement. Veteran Affairs Canada has extended benefits to military members and their families beyond retirement with operational stress injury clinics because it recognizes that soldiers experience problems after retirement.

In addition to the loss of benefit coverage, police officers typically lose other forms of support when they retire, such as peer support programs.

Staying engaged through peer support

When officers retire, a wealth of knowledge goes with them. Sure, they pass on their wisdom to junior officers but why does it have

to stop at retirement? Peer support programs such as critical incident stress management teams (CISM) would greatly benefit from having a retired officer section (and a family section, but that's another column) operated by retired officers.

Retired officers can offer peer support to other retired officers and continue to contribute to non-retiring officers by sharing their wisdom with those still working. Who would be better positioned to talk about the experience of retiring from police work? They can provide an invaluable service to officers nearing retirement while maintaining social connections and contributions to the workplace. It's a win-win situation. Retirees can decide how much time they wish to devote to their involvement in the peer support team.

If your agency does not offer retiree support services, I encourage you to form your own informal support system.

There is no doubt that retiring from policing may conjure up mixed feelings of happiness and sadness but it should not be an isolating experience. Once you are a brother/sister in blue, you will always be a part of the family in blue.

¹ Patton, D., Violanti, J. M., Burke, K., & Gehrke, A. (2009). *Traumatic stress in police officers: A career-length assessment from recruitment to retirement*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher.

² Gilmartin, K. M. (2002). *Emotional survival for law enforcement: A guide for officers and their families*. Tucson, AZ: E-S Press.

Stephanie Conn is a registered clinical counsellor and former communications dispatcher and police officer. To find out more visit www.conncounselingandconsulting.com or email her at stephanie@blueline.ca.