



by Stephanie Conn

## Secondary traumatic stress

We have all heard of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) but, chances are, many have not heard of its lesser-known cousin, secondary traumatic stress (STS). Police officers are more likely to suffer from it throughout their careers than PTSD.<sup>1</sup> Here is what you need to know.

STS refers to a set of psychological symptoms that mimic PTSD but, unlike the singular critical incident that tends to accompany PTSD, STS occurs when a police officer is continuously exposed to the suffering and traumatization of others. The impact of this ongoing exposure to suffering is insidious. The officer cannot point to a single event as the culprit. Initially, this makes it difficult to file claims with the Worker's Compensation Board but, fortunately, it has recently recognized the cumulative effects of ongoing exposure to trauma (STS) on police officers.

The effects are psychological, physiological, behavioural and spiritual. Psychological symptoms include depression, anxiety, distressing emotions, intrusive imagery, numbing or avoidance and dissociation. It also affects your perception of situations and may result in chronic suspicion of others, a heightened sense of vulnerability, feelings of powerlessness and a lack of control.

Physiological symptoms can include headaches, gastrointestinal distress, heart palpitations, hypertension, heart disease, kidney diseases, hyperglycemia, hypoglycemia, fatigue and premature aging.

Behavioural symptoms include addictive or compulsive behaviours such as substance abuse, physiological arousal, relationship difficulties, absenteeism, excessive force and sleep disturbances.

Police work also changes the "soul" of officers as they repeatedly face human suffering, deception and violence. Officers report changes



in their spiritual beliefs after entering the policing profession.<sup>2</sup> If this does not grab your attention, maybe the following statistics will.

In a large-scale study of cumulative career traumatic stress, an alternative name for STS, police officers reported high levels of disturbance from their exposure to trauma on the job:<sup>1</sup>

- 96% of participants reported that their opinions of others had changed;
- 92% reported they no longer trusted others;
- 82% believed the world was an unsafe place;
- 88% experienced prejudices they did not hold prior to being on the job;
- 74% of participants reported experiencing recurring memories of an incident;
- 62% experienced recurring thoughts or images;
- 54% avoided reminders of an incident;
- 47% experienced flashbacks of an incident;
- 11% experienced suicidal ideation as a result of the occupation.

Research indicates that if a police officer suffers from STS, their partner is also at risk<sup>3</sup> because they are exposed to the trauma when the officer retells the events of the day. Even if details are

left out, the partner may fill them in and create a disturbing mental image to accompany the story.

### Insulate yourself

Taking care of yourself is vital to guarding against STS. There are many ways to do this – exercise, participating in hobbies outside of work, maintaining supportive relationships and talking with co-workers and a professional.

Officers have reported that it was helpful to periodically unload their troubles on a person not involved in their personal life, such as a mental health professional. It is a good place to let it all out without fear of judgment or traumatizing the listener.

If you find yourself struggling with feeling that you are facing unfixable suffering, you may also wish to change your view of how you define success in your work. You will never eliminate crime. You must look for the smaller victories – the small changes that you can make in the lives of others.

It is also important to recognize and accept your limitations as a human. You by yourself cannot fix problems that took months, years or decades to develop.

It also helps to bear in mind that you are only exposed to a small slice of the population. Think about it. Nobody calls the police to come observe that little Johnny is doing well in school. You are only called upon when something bad happens. This is why it is so critical for you to maintain relationships outside of policing and participate in non-police activities – it exposes you to the rest of the population and helps keep a balanced view of humanity.

I have presented some pretty scary symptoms and staggering statistics regarding the effects of STS. I hope what you take away from this is that you have the power to take a proactive approach to counter these effects. If you are already experiencing them, I hope you find comfort in knowing you are not alone and that help is available.

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Stephanie Conn is a registered clinical counsellor and former communications dispatcher and police officer. To find out more visit [www.conncounsellingandconsulting.com](http://www.conncounsellingandconsulting.com) or email her at [stephanie@blueline.ca](mailto:stephanie@blueline.ca).