Police officers have supported one another since the inception of police forces. In the early years when police officers experienced emotional difficulties or troubling stressors, whether or not work related, they could always rely on the traditional B and B (booze and buddies) for solace. As you might expect, the results produced by the B and B method of stress management were sometimes less than desirable. Although booze and buddies still exist today, police officers now have several alternatives for assistance when dealing with stress-related difficulties. In many contemporary police agencies, these alternatives include the option of working with members of the department’s peer support team.

Police peer support teams have proven their value and have demonstrated their effectiveness for many years. They have established their place in the police mentality and have become an integral part of many law enforcement agencies.

Some police administrators do not recognize the need for peer support teams. This is because most agency employees (1) have access to a jurisdiction-wide employee assistance program (EAP) and (2) most agency health insurance benefit plans include a provision for psychological counseling. The availability of EAP and health plan psychological counseling for police officers represents a significant advancement in the delivery of counseling services. However, for officers, EAPs and health plan counseling, although helpful, appear insufficient. They are helpful in that they are used by some officers who might not otherwise seek assistance. They are insufficient in that despite their availability, they do not and cannot meet the needs of many police officers.

Peer support teams occupy a support niche that cannot be readily filled by either an EAP, health plan provisions, or a police staff psychologist. If an agency wants to do the best it can to support its officers, a peer support team is necessary. Incidentally, a peer support team is one of the most valued resources for a police psychologist—many police psychologist counseling and pre-emptive intervention programs are designed to incorporate the efficacy of peer support.

If you are reading this as a member of a police peer support team, your agency has recognized the value of peer support. This means that your department has endorsed the principles of peer support and has willingly committed resources to make peer support available. As a peer support team member, you recognize this commitment and have assumed the responsibility to function within the parameters of your agency’s peer support team policy, operational guidelines, and training. If you are reading this and your agency does not have a peer support team, I encourage you to initiate...
a discussion about developing one. With appropriate member selection, training, and ongoing clinical advisement or supervision, a peer support team can become an invaluable asset to any policing agency. (A Civilian Peer Support Team Manual is available here.)

PEER SUPPORT AND POLICE PEER SUPPORT TEAMS

Peer support differs from counseling and psychotherapy. Peer support is a non-professional supportive interaction, whereas counseling and psychotherapy traditionally involve a professional relationship with a licensed clinician. Therefore, peer support is best conceptualized as a non-professional interpersonal interaction wherein: (1) a person attempts to assist another person with a stressful circumstance, and (2) the person providing support shares some common background, experience, condition, or history with the person he or she is attempting to help.

LEVEL I AND LEVEL II PEER SUPPORT

There are two levels of peer support. Level I peer support consists of the support found in the everyday positive interactions of friends, co-workers, and others that might be considered peers. Nearly everyone, at one time or another, has been the provider and the recipient of this type of peer support. As most of us know, Level I peer support may or may not be desired or helpful. However, Level I peer support has a long history and can be thought of as “traditional” peer support. Level II peer support is similar to Level I, but Level II peer support includes several components that may be missing in Level I. This makes Level II peer support interactions different from the Level I support that can come from “friends talking.”

Level II interactions are characterized by (1) similar experiences, background, conditions, or history; (2) considering whether a person is open to peer support; (3) an ongoing assessment during peer support of the desire of the person to continue; (4) a commitment to avoid being intrusive; (5) elements of functional relationships; (6) goals for exploration, empowerment, and positive change; (7) ethical & conceptual parameters; and (8) an evaluative component if necessary, to determine whether a person represents a danger to him or herself or others.

“Psychologically healthy police officers are far more likely to provide high-quality, professional services to the members of their communities... Police chiefs can protect and enhance that investment by various methods aimed at promoting wellness. One effective strategy for stimulating a culture of psychological wellness within an agency is the development and maintenance of a peer support program. Such programs need not be the exclusive purview of large departments with behavioral health sections; small departments would also greatly benefit from the training of their staff in peer support techniques.”

~ M.D. Kamena, D. Gentz, V. Hays, N. Bohl-Penrod, and L.W. Greene ~
Most importantly, Level II peer support involves members of a peer support team operating under department policy and in compliance with the peer support team operational guidelines. In Colorado, for example, statutory confidentiality for police peer support team members functioning in the peer support role is specified in state’s Revised Statutes 13-90-107(m). Additional administrative confidentiality protection may be specified by department policy. Level II peer support, like Level I, may consist of a one-time contact or ongoing meetings.

**WHY PEER SUPPORT?**

Employee Assistance Programs and community mental health organizations and providers are significant resources, but appear to be insufficient to provide the totality of support services which best serve those in law enforcement. Does peer support work? The efficacy of well-trained police peer support teams has been demonstrated many times. However, peer support teams do not function in a vacuum. The efficacy of police peer support teams is in large part dependent upon the support and endorsement of department administrators, supervisors, and officers.

**THE PEER SUPPORT TEAM MISSION**

The Peer Support Team (PST) functions as a support resource for employees and their families. The PST provides support to personnel experiencing personal and work related stress. It also provides support during and following critical or traumatic incidents resulting from performance of duty.

“**During the training of peer supporter candidates, it sometimes becomes obvious that an officer would be ineffective. Sometimes officers decide on their own that they are inappropriate for the role because of the difficulties they experience during training in opening up themselves to the other trainees. In addition, certain officers may become preoccupied with details of shooting incidents rather than the emotional impact that the event has on the individual officer. As a consequence, during training sessions when specific examples are used, this group of officers often becomes concerned about the ‘rightness’ of the shooting or about the potential of becoming a witness in a civil suit. Experience has shown that when this is the case, these officers typically lack empathy or are largely indifferent to the emotional state of fellow officers and tend to become preoccupied in the technical aspects of the police situation: e.g., conditions for the use of force and/or police tactics. Obviously, people with this type of orientation will be largely ineffective in a peer counseling role and this has been borne out through subsequent events.”**

~ Peter Finn & Julie Esselman Tomz ~

*Developing a Law Enforcement Stress Program for Officers and Their Families*

Free download available from the U.S. Department of Justice [here](#).
THE FUTURE OF POLICE PEER SUPPORT TEAMS

A greater profession-wide effort must be made to integrate peer support teams into more law enforcement agencies. For peer support teams to function well, police officers must also place an emphasis on developing statutory confidentiality protections, standardizing foundation training, standardizing ethical parameters, establishing clinical supervision and a “ladder of escalation” (support for the supporters), ongoing monthly training, and regularly scheduled team meetings.

(An example of the operational guidelines we use for a model peer support team in Colorado is available [here](#). With some editing these guidelines can be used in other jurisdictions.)

LAW ENFORCEMENT BASIC PEER SUPPORT TRAINING

We have established a four-day training program in Colorado that is designed to prepare police personnel to function as members of a law enforcement agency peer support team (32 training hours). The content of the program includes discussions about what is peer support, role and responsibilities of peer support teams, agency peer support team policy and operational guidelines, structure and function of peer support teams, pre-emptive programs, cognitive-phenomenological approach to stress, occupational stress and stressor intervention, cognitive conceptualization, stressors and mental diagnoses, critical incidents and traumatic stress, concepts in traumatic exposure, post-traumatic responses, treatment and interventions, police relationships and family dynamics, life perspectives and their influence on life quality, peer support and counseling, stage theory of peer counseling, team confidentiality and legal issues, peer support clinical supervision, referral considerations, substance use and process addictions, police suicide, suicide by cop and its aftermath, suicidal ideation assessment and intervention, coping with death, death and mourning, trauma intervention program, transactional analysis, perspectives in survivorship, and critical incident debriefing.

ADvanced Peer Support Team Training

A two-day Advanced Peer Support Team Training program is available for established law enforcement peer support teams that wish to enhance their peer support skills and overall team effectiveness (16 training hours).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A Peer Support Team Code of Ethical Conduct was developed in 2015 that consists of 21 ethical principles designed to help team members

“Nationwide, law enforcement agencies have been using peer supporters for several years. Since peers are not mental health professionals, there is no official record kept of individuals who use the Peer Support Program... The Peer Support Program is not an element of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), nor is it a substitute for professional help.”

~ Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers ~
Website...Twitter
provide ethical peer support. The code can be viewed or downloaded here.

To keep department employees informed of peer support, many established peer support teams choose to publish and distribute a quarterly peer support team newsletter. To view an issue of the Peer Support Team Newsletter, click here. This issue of the newsletter includes articles about the “Positive Side of Critical Incidents,” “Causes of Officer Stress and Fatigue,” “Mental Illness and Violent Crime,” the “Impact of Sleep Deprivation on Police Performance,” and the role of ketamine to treat depression.

A third resource is provided by Peer Resources. They maintain an extensive and continually updated list of peer programs run by law enforcement and first responder organizations throughout North America, as well as a list of organizations that specialize in training law enforcement members. Access to this list is free and is available here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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OPTIONS FOR PRN MEMBERS

- Download this article as a PDF.
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“Several program directors and researchers emphasize that officers who become peer supporters are not trained to provide counseling and, to avoid misunderstanding about their role, they should be called ‘peer supporters’ not ‘peer counselors.’ According to the Peer Support Guidelines prepared by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), ‘A Peer Support Person . . . , sworn or not sworn, is a specifically trained colleague, not a counselor or a therapist.’ To prevent them from engaging in counseling, John Carr of the Rhode Island Centurion Program requires his peer supporters to consult with him if they talk with an officer on three occasions about the same topic. After that, according to Carr, ‘listening isn’t enough for that officer; he or she is stuck with a problem and may need professional counseling, which we need to determine and make available.’”

~ Peter Finn & Julie Esselman Tomz ~

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