

Grief and Loss in Law Enforcement: Helping Officers and Agencies Recover and Heal

Guidance for Law Enforcement Officers

How Can You Cope with Grief After a Loss?

Following a loss, you must often return to work right away. You may be expected to do your job fully, despite the grief and emotion you may be processing. Although work can provide a helpful return to normalcy, it can also lead to additional stress and avoiding feelings. It is important to communicate your needs related to time off and check your department's bereavement leave policy.

Here are some ways to cope in the days, weeks, and months after a death or other major loss.

Listen to Yourself.

When something is affecting you more than usual, you may need to use new or additional coping methods. If a loss is sticking with you or has impacted you deeply, talking with someone close to you can help. If you are unsure about what you need, a trusted person might be able to make suggestions or offer strategies for coping.

Take Action When Grief Is Piling Up.

If grief makes it difficult to effectively do your job, interact well with other people, or struggle to return to what feels like your normal self, or if you feel depressed and hopeless, it is best to seek professional help.¹ Seeking help can include connecting with an employee assistance program, peer support services, grief support groups online or in-person, or chaplain services. It is important to seek help as soon as you think support might be helpful before the impacts of grief begin to compile.

Avoid Unhealthy Habits That Might Make Coping Harder.

It is common to try to ease feelings of grief by turning to a coping mechanism, such as using alcohol or drugs that ultimately make the situation worse. For many, this means refraining from isolating, making major changes, or depending on substances to get you through difficult feelings.

Give Yourself Time.

Most people want difficult thoughts and feelings to disappear quickly, but it can be hard when certain grief-related feelings do not go away in the timeframe you expected. Because grief and loss can affect you more strongly than day-to-day stressors, their impacts are less likely to fade quickly. It takes time, energy, and effort to process and cope with your personal experience of grief and loss.

Honor and Remember.

Although the experience of grief often decreases over time, most people experience these feelings in waves. Specific events may stir up memories and feelings, such as birthdays and anniversaries. You may also experience feelings of grief if you are in a situation that is similar to how a fellow officer died. These moments may take you by surprise and make you feel as though you have taken a step back in the healing process. Know that these reactions are normal and are, in fact, a part of grieving and healing.

During these times, it can be healing to remember, celebrate, and honor the person who has died. It can also be helpful to honor and remember a person at specific times such as a birthday, when they joined the

force, the anniversary of their death, and national days of remembrance for fallen officers. You may want to share stories about the person with others who knew them, look at pictures, visit a memorial honoring fallen officers, or give a donation to the person's favorite charity. Most importantly, choose actions that feel right to you for honoring your relationship with the person.

Do you need support processing a loss? Is someone you know struggling with grief? Reach out for help. Many departments offer local resources. Inquire about support in your area and within your agency. Additional resources are listed below.

Resources

Cop2Cop

1-866-COP2COP (1-266-267-2267)

<https://njcop2cop.com/>

Cop2Cop is a 24/7 confidential peer support resource for law enforcement officers and their families.

Cop2Cop peer counselors are retired officers and licensed clinicians who have served several different law enforcement agencies, including county, municipal, corrections, and large and small agencies. All ranks and positions are represented from patrol to chiefs of police.

CopLine

1-800-COPLINE (1-800-267-5463)

<https://www.copline.org/>

CopLine is an international law enforcement officers' hotline that provides confidential and anonymous peer listening by retired police officers.

Safe Call Now

206-459-3020

<https://www.safecallnowusa.org/>

Safe Call Now is a confidential, comprehensive, 24-hour crisis referral service for all public safety employees, all emergency services personnel, and their family members nationwide.

Endnote

- 1 "Handling Line-of-Duty Deaths: Resource Guide for Officers and Agencies." Concerns of Police Survivors. Accessed September 20, 2021. <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/ac5c0731/files/uploaded/LE%20Line%20of%20Duty%20Death%20Guide%20%281%29.pdf>.

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Grief is a normal, yet complex emotion. The grief process can be difficult and may vary between individuals. Give yourself time to process and heal. The nature of the job is to put other's needs before your own. Prioritize your wellness. Manage your well-being. You are not alone.

Concerns of Police Survivors (C.O.P.S.)

<https://www.concernsofpolicesurvivors.org/>

C.O.P.S. offers resources and trainings for agencies, coworkers, and families affected by line-of-duty deaths.

After a Suicide in Blue: A Guide for Law Enforcement Agencies

https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/244736_IACP_NOSI_AfterSuicide_p5.pdf

This resource guides law enforcement agencies in navigating the death of an officer by suicide and makes recommendations for agency policies, leadership communication, and offering peer and family support.

Agency Specific Resources

For more officer wellness resources visit: www.theIACP.org/OSW

@ osw@theiacp.org

theIACP.org/OSW

800.THE.IACP