Preventing Problematic Alcohol Use among Police
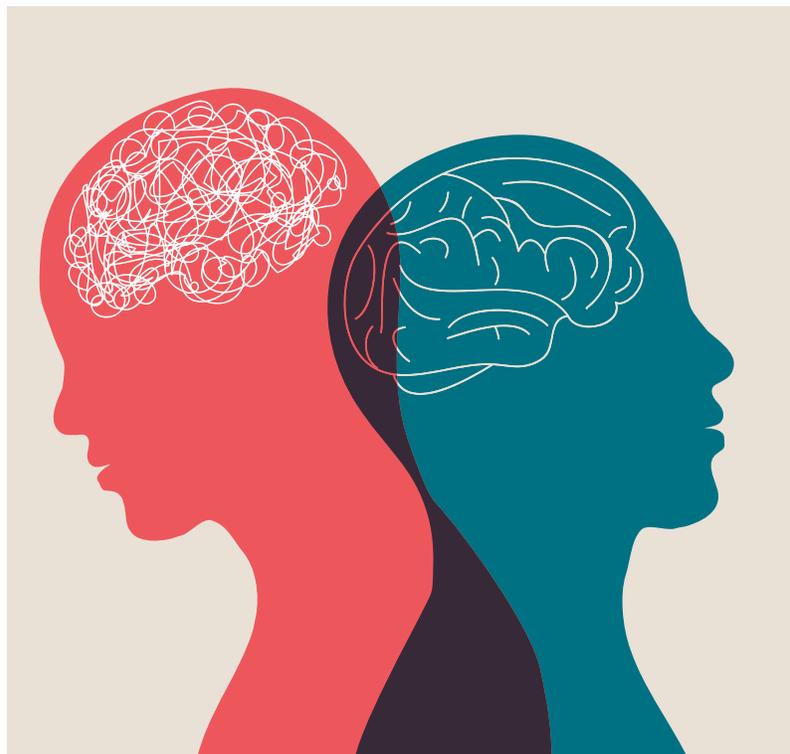## Creating a Culture that Encourages Healthy Help-Seeking
Guidance for Agency Leaders

Law enforcement is a uniquely stressful career involving dangers, pressures, and challenges that requires officers to respond with a high level of emotional skill. Effectively managing stress and emotion helps give officers the ability to remain objective in intense situations. To stay focused and productive, they must often separate emotion from duty. However, this same mindset, when applied to processing the emotional and psychological impact of the job, can become detrimental.

Due to the nature of police work, officers are likely to be exposed to traumatic events at a higher rate and are more likely to develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) than the general population.[1] When officers are not able to cope with trauma and stress in healthy ways, they may turn to alcohol misuse or other potentially harmful outlets. Turning to such measures often causes officers to avoid addressing and processing emotion. This resource is designed to help both officers and leadership address these challenges and develop more productive ways of managing stress.

Police Culture and Avoidant Coping

Although there is not just one single "culture of policing," research has shown that many law enforcement agencies have a set of shared values that are designed to increase a sense of camaraderie and help officers cope with the demands of the job.[2] Some of these values include supporting one's fellow officers, pride in the profession, being held to a higher standard than other professionals, and resilience. Law enforcement as a profession also tends to embrace values such as courage, strength, emotional control, self-reliance, and independence.

Many of these values help police recruits and new officers develop an ethic of loyalty, solidarity, and support that can benefit them throughout their career.[3] However, overemphasis on or misinterpretation of these values may discourage appropriate help-seeking[4] and encourage avoidant coping behavior.

Avoidant coping is managing stress or distress in ways that allow one to disengage from emotion and try to ignore difficulties and challenges.[5] Examples of avoidant coping include:

🍷🍾🍺	**Drinking heavily and/or frequently**
❌💬	**Not talking about one's distress with anyone close, e.g., family, friends, co-workers**
🙅	**Refusing to ask for help**
👤👥	**Isolating oneself socially**

While everyone engages in avoidant coping at times, there is also a significant relationship between over-use of these behaviors and mental health difficulties, including symptoms of PTSD.[6] The culture of a police department can often have a significant impact on an officer's decision to seek support when they are struggling with mental health difficulties. Officers from departments where seeking help is looked down upon or discouraged are less likely to access needed mental health services. Additionally, a high degree of stigma among police officers toward seeking help for mental health concerns has been associated with more post-traumatic stress symptoms.[7]

The combination of compounding stress, exposure to trauma, misinterpretation of values, and cultural stigma can lead to an increased risk of engaging in avoidant coping. Although all forms of avoidant coping can have negative consequences, the rest of this resource will focus on problematic alcohol use among police officers.

Alcohol Use among Police

There is conflicting research on whether police officers engage in more problematic alcohol use than the general population. However, working to prevent problematic alcohol use can reduce risk, including potential harm to officers and to the agency. For example, alcohol-related offenses are one of the most likely reasons for police officers to be fired,[8] and officers who drink on the job can make harmful, costly, and dangerous mistakes.

Several studies have found that officers who engage in problematic alcohol use are more likely to use primarily negative coping strategies and more likely to have symptoms of PTSD than officers who do not engage in problematic alcohol use.[9][10] Since using more effective coping skills can reduce the risk of developing PTSD, preparing officers to cope with traumatic events is a vital part of helping them manage the stressors and challenges of their job.

In addition to using alcohol as a means of coping with stress, many officers drink socially with their colleagues and to bond with fellow officers. One study showed that the officers who drank to "fit in" were the most likely to engage in hazardous drinking practices.[11] So, it is important for police agencies and leadership to promote healthy bonding behaviors within the organizational culture.

To address these issues, this resource focuses on what organizational leadership and line-level officers can do to encourage appropriate coping and help-seeking within their agencies and among their peers. Information is also included on developing healthy coping skills and identifying and addressing potentially problematic alcohol use.

Creating a Culture that Encourages Healthy Help-Seeking

Organizational culture often has a big impact on whether police officers feel safe seeking help if they are struggling with mental health issues or alcohol misuse. Therefore, it is critical for leadership within law enforcement organizations to create and foster an environment that encourages officers to seek help when they are having difficulties.[12]

The following are strategies that law enforcement leadership can use to create an organizational culture that supports help-seeking:

EDUCATE officers about the mental health impact of working in law enforcement:

- Recognize the unique impact that working in law enforcement can have on stress and well-being.
- Train officers to be proactive in taking care of their health and well-being.

INFORM officers about available resources and how to access them:

- Provide this information to all officers, including new hires when they start working with your agency. Ensure information about both internal and external resources is accessible– some officers may be more comfortable with resources not directly connected to the department.

CULTIVATE A HELP-SEEKING CULTURE: Share stories of experiencing and overcoming personal challenges, particularly from the leadership level:

- Provide organizational messaging that encourages help-seeking, and back up that messaging with consistent policy and action around mental health and substance misuse.
- Train supervisors on how to identify officers who may be struggling and how to talk with them about their difficulties.

SUPPORT PROACTIVE, POSITIVE INTERACTIONS for department leadership and officers to connect with knowledgeable mental health professionals:

- Consider employing culturally competent mental health staff within the department or inviting professionals to provide training or critical incident support. Ensure that officers can access mental health resources confidentially and without fear of reprisal or ridicule.
- Provide opportunities for officers and leadership to interact with mental health professionals to develop comfort and familiarity with available resources.
- Put policies in place that allow officers to seek help proactively with mental health or substance use without career repercussions.
- Maintain some degree of regular interaction with mental health providers to create trust and comfort with these professionals for officers and leadership.

ENCOURAGE SOCIALIZING among officers that does not involve alcohol:

- Create an agency social culture that is oriented around wellness-driven activities. Providing officers with an outlet to bond and decompress, together, in a positive environment, may help promote a healthy agency culture. Consider organizing sporting events, group workouts, wellness sessions, or family engagement activities. Creating an agency social culture that is oriented around innovative, healthy activities may help keep alcohol misuse to a minimum.

IACP
International Association of Chiefs of Police

BJA
Bureau of Justice Assistance
U.S. Department of Justice

VALOR
OFFICER SAFETY AND WELLNESS INITIATIVE
BUREAU OF JUSTICE ASSISTANCE

EDC
Education Development Center

theIACP.org

Resources:

SAMSHA National Helpline	24/7 resources and support	**1-800-662-4357**
COPLINE	Helpline staffed 24/7 by trained, retired law enforcement officers	**1-800-267-5463**
Cop2Cop	Helpline staffed 24/7 by trained, retired law enforcement officers	**1-800-267-2267**
First Help	Helps first responders connect with local resources	**http://www.1sthelp.net/**
Safe Call Now	24/7 support from other first responders	**206-459-3020**

Endnotes

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