

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

Guidance for Agency Leaders

Police officers are regularly exposed to loss, death, and grief in their work. Observing and assisting people with the impacts of death and loss can naturally affect an officer. Not only do police frequently respond to scenes where a person has died, they often interact with and support grieving family and community members. Additionally, police may experience the death of fellow officers or of their own family and friends.

There are many sources of grief and loss, in addition to death, that officers may face throughout their careers. Police may also experience a loss of their role and identity due to injuries and aging, which may lead to changes in duties and assignments, advancement, and retirement. They may experience grief in response to these career transitions as well as changes in their personal lives. These experiences with death and loss can be especially difficult for officers who are more comfortable helping others grieve rather than expressing their own thoughts and emotions related to loss.

This resource is designed to assist officers, supervisors, and agencies in understanding strategies to cope with various types of grief and loss throughout their careers.

What Is Grief?

Grief is a normal response of sorrow and pain that happens after losing someone or something important. Grief can also occur after a disaster or other traumatic event.¹ Officers may also experience a change in connection, camaraderie, and even identity as they advance in their careers. Grief is a common and necessary part of the healing process following a loss and can last weeks to years. Grief is very complex. The experience and duration of grief vary with each person, within and across cultures, and the type of loss experienced.

How Do Police Officers Experience Grief?

Grief involves emotional, behavioral, and physical reactions. Reactions may include:^{1,2,3}

- Intense feelings of sadness, emptiness, anxiety, or denial
- Irritability
- Anger toward a higher power, people involved in the incident, or the person who died
- Questioning the meaning of life
- Difficulty concentrating or slower thinking
- Difficulty sleeping or fatigue
- Excessive sleeping, lack of energy
- Changes in appetite
- Muscle weakness or tension, aches and pains, nausea, rapid heartbeat, illness
- Avoidant coping, such as substance misuse
- Withdrawal from others and usual activities, loneliness
- Missing work or working overtime as a way of coping

Police officers may respond to and experience many different types of losses that could affect them and their grieving process in a variety of ways. Deaths that police officers encounter while on duty do not usually lead to the same type of grief felt from losing a loved one, but they can still have an impact. For example, if an officer responds to a call involving the death of a child, it likely will be more traumatic. They will not necessarily miss that child but may become upset from imagining how they would feel if they lost their own child or if someone close to them lost a child.² This is a natural human reaction to this type of situation.

With the team culture in police work, the loss of a fellow officer may be very painful and cause officers to consider their own mortality. When an officer is lost in the line of duty, survivor's guilt may arise, particularly if officers were present at the same incident. They may wonder why the other officer died and not them, and what they could have done differently to prevent the death. It is normal to feel this way and valuable to express one's thoughts and feelings in order to process and move beyond them.^{2,3}

The impact of exposure to multiple deaths can also take an emotional and a spiritual toll on officers and even lead to a loss of purpose and meaning. This exposure can also lead to compassion fatigue, which is a physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion that can affect people in helping roles. This can make it more difficult for officers to support their co-workers and the people they serve who have lost a loved one.²

What Are Signs of Prolonged Grief?

Grief is an individual process that looks different for every person. Although most people return to their regular functioning within weeks, months, or a year, some people experience grief that lasts for several years or longer. This is called prolonged grief or complicated grief.⁴

Officers who experience prolonged grief may have difficulty expressing and managing their emotions. These problems may impair their ability to make decisions, which can have serious consequences when they need to deescalate potentially dangerous situations. Difficulties with emotions may also negatively affect officers' relationships with their co-workers, family members, and friends.² Officers experiencing prolonged grief may benefit from seeking professional help.³



How to Help Officers Cope with Grief after a Loss

While taking time off following a loss is encouraged, police officers must often return to work right away. They may be expected to do their job fully, including making quick and important decisions to protect the community. Although work can provide a helpful return to routine and normalcy, it can also be a source of additional stress and a way to avoid feelings, which can lead to complications in the grieving process.¹

Here are some actions to support officers with coping in the days, weeks, and months after a death or other major loss:

- Encourage officers to take time off to process emotions¹
- Take time to remember and honor a fellow officer who has died⁴
- Encourage officers to get support and engage in social activities when they are ready^{1,2}
- Offer help from peers, such as fellow officers or a peer support group of officers⁴
- Promote options to access mental health professionals, chaplains, and other service providers who can help officers cope with grief^{2,4}
- Understand and educate officers on bereavement policies including bereavement leave
- Conduct periodic, informal check-ins. Let officers know they are cared for and supported. Empathize and ensure officers know they are not alone

One can experience grief from many different circumstances including death, trauma, and personal and professional changes. Remember that what contributes to grief and the grieving process is unique to each person and that different strategies may work for different people. Keep in mind that grief can weigh heavily when experienced alone. While one officer has not likely been through the exact experience of another officer, fellow officers understand grief and loss and the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors associated with it. It can be supportive, empowering, and validating for an officer to share their journey of grief with a peer, family member, or chaplain.

The attached tool for officers can be used to help them understand how to cope with grief, normalize help-seeking, and learn how to take action before prolonged grief sets in. Agencies and supervisors can share this tool with their officers in a variety of ways, including posting it on roll call boards and in locker rooms, sending it out in newsletters, or handing it out during wellness sessions and family events.

Endnotes

- 1 "Coping with Grief: What Fire Fighters Need to Know." IAFFRecoveryCenter.com, December 13, 2019. <https://www.iaffrecoverycenter.com/blog/coping-grief/>.
- 2 Blumberg, Daniel M, Peter Collins, Konstantinos Papazoglou, Mike Schlosser, and George Bonanno. "Death and Loss in Police Work." Police Chief Online, May 27, 2020. <https://www.policechiefmagazine.org/death-and-loss-in-police-work/?ref=4cb7dae74852d981da b48d135669a589>.
- 3 "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>.
- 4 Papazoglou, Konstantinos, Daniel M. Blumberg, Peter I. Collins, Michael D. Schlosser, and George A. Bonanno. "Inevitable Loss and Prolonged Grief in Police Work: An Unexplored Topic." Frontiers, February 10, 2020. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01178/full>.

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