

COP TALK

by Dr. Beverly Anderson

Beating the Holiday Blues

The hustle and bustle of the holiday season descends upon us well before Thanksgiving wherein we are inundated with television commercials depicting happy families with smiling parents and gleeful children. Everyone is gathered around a festive holiday table and granddad is ready to carve the turkey. While the media would have us believe that this is the norm, it's not all that normal for everyone. That is especially true for those of us in law enforcement. After all, people don't call the police because they are feeling the "holiday spirit."

In addition to the usual pressures of rotating schedules, court time, leave restrictions, and normal financial crunches, officers must squeeze in extra time for holiday shopping at the malls, and stretching the budget to its limits without going overboard. Getting caught up in the "Madison Avenue" hype of "giving" can have dire consequences in January when those credit card bills are screaming to be paid.

While the reader might assert that everyone experiences these kinds of stressors around the holidays, my experiences with trauma and law enforcement has yielded a different theory. Traumatic exposure over the course of many years on the job is cumulative. Unlike most citizens who spend their holidays away from their jobs, police officers must work these important holidays. Unfortunately, traumatic events often take place on days that are meant to represent happiness and joy. Domestic assaults, child abuse, and deadly accidents caused by drunk drivers are all events that bring "first responders" to the scenes. Officers must deal with the tragedies they see and the victims that are left behind. While cruelty and "man's inhumanity to man" happens every day on the streets, there is an inherent expectation that the holidays are special. Reality has proven otherwise. So, for officers, Christmas might trigger reminders of a tragedy that took place on a Christmas when they were working. Since police officers are masters at the art of "emotional cover-up" and "numbing out," you won't hear officers talk about the painful past to their families because no one understands the "job" except for other officers. Instead, what you may see is an officer who is emotionally distant, impatient, irritable, and lacking in the "holiday spirit." This reaction then leads to "guilt" which the officer may try to make up for with expensive gifts, hoping to improve relationships that have been languishing. Moreover, officers take their roles as caretakers and protectors very seriously; and do not speak to loved ones about the horrors they see on the streets.

Family relationships, finances, and the physical demands around the holidays can lead to frustration and depression. To further complicate this already stressful time is the negative impact that loss through divorce, family estrangement, an unhappy childhood, or death can play during the holidays. Facing the holidays without a loved one is more difficult than most people can imagine. Feeling lonely and sad when everyone else

seems to be celebrating can isolate a person even more. This can lead to “self-soothing” behaviors like drinking too much or spending too much; which can cause additional and more serious problems. Consider the following suggestions for getting through the holidays.

Healthy Tips for Beating the Holiday Blues

- If you have experienced the loss of a loved one, give yourself permission to grieve. It’s normal. Don’t expect yourself to put on a “happy face.”
- Find someone you trust to talk to about your feelings. Talking about your feelings has a healing effect similar to that of taking a heavy load off your shoulders. It doesn’t make you a weak person.
- Tell family and friends what you need. Don’t keep it to yourself and expect them to “read your mind.” That just leads to resentment. Use “I” messages to express how you feel.
- Engage in strenuous physical exercise. It’s a proven stress reliever and it increases your body’s immune system and metabolism. Don’t wait until you *feel motivated* to exercise. Take action and do the opposite of what you’re feeling.
- Be realistic about the holiday season. All the TV “hype” is not going to ward off feelings of loneliness; nor is it going to solve all past problems.
- Establish a spending limit and stick to it! Look for ways to show people that you care without spending lots of money that you don’t have.
- Take time for yourself...even if it’s just to relax.
- Set limits and priorities. Make a “To Do” list to arrange your priorities.
- Volunteer to work for an officer who has young children at home if you have no one to spend the holidays with. He or she will always remember that act of kindness.
- Don’t use alcohol or food to sooth your feelings of loneliness or sadness. They’re just temporary fixes.
- Remember that “policing” is a unique profession that is meant for only the most resilient of people. You have been chosen for law enforcement because you care about others. Celebrate your profession. Being exposed to trauma impacts you; but it doesn’t mean that you are diminished because of it.
- Be grateful for your health and for the good people in your life.
- If you need to talk to someone, call the MPEAP for confidential help. It’s a negotiated benefit for officers, officials, and their families.

In closing, the therapists of the MPEAP thank you for your service and wish you good health and happiness.

Dr. Anderson is the Clinical Director/Administrator of the Metropolitan Police Employee Assistance Program (MPEAP) in Washington, DC. The MPEAP is located at 901 East Capitol St., SE. Telephone number: (202) 546-9684.

Content may not be reproduced on websites without express permission. Please link instead.

