

# **The Power of Compassion to Heal and to Make a Meaningful Difference**

Compassion is the DNA of professional police service dedicated to alleviating suffering, serving the needs of others and the community, solving problems, protecting life and creating positive change in people's lives. Compassion fuels our highest motives in being as helpful and useful as possible in doing the most good.

However, without consistent effort, compassion fatigue can cripple an officer's abilities to provide the most effective professional services and can often leave the officer calloused, disillusioned, ineffective and uncaring.

## **The importance of compassion in policing**

As a peace officer, if you are not driven by your heart to make a positive difference with every call and to do as much good as you can for those in need, for your colleagues, your agency and your community in compassionate and meaningful ways — then the job can eat you alive.

Compassionate service in being as useful and helpful as possible is one of the most powerful wellness strategies that serves to strengthen resilience while keeping officers motivated, professional and inspired to do their best in the service of others.

Compassion in professional policing is essential because it enables and empowers the good that can be done in any given situation. It enables officers to make the most of the daily opportunities to positively affect people's lives.

Compassion is the recognition of someone's suffering or of any need, then being driven by one's heart to make a meaningful difference. It is an officer's capacity to care, to do good and to be helpful. It is what enables officers to be the good amid all the bad.

The everyday work traumas of the police profession can suffocate an officer's heart, leaving them cold and detached, unable to experience the fullness of life. Putting their heart into their service in meaningful ways helps to prevent this all-too-common tragic outcome of policing.

## **What is compassion fatigue?**

Compassion fatigue is when an officer becomes indifferent or uncaring and stops wanting to make a difference. This is mainly the result of two things: First, not being steadfast in their own *daily* self-care and resilience practices; and second, when they do something hoping for a specific desired outcome but then get discouraged when that outcome doesn't materialize.

Compassion fatigue can lead to a lack of purpose in policing. It can cause significant psychological and emotional distress that makes professional policing all the more challenging and potentially harmful to the well-being of the officer.

There are several warning signs of being affected by compassion fatigue: inability to care, feeling burned out, lack of desire to want to help, feelings of being numb to life, becoming increasingly self-centered and cynical, becoming more negative, being disinterested in others, a growing sense of hopelessness and indifference.

Compassion fatigue can lead to increased stress and tension, decreased resiliency, fatigue and sleep disturbances, loss of interest in the job and becoming increasingly irritable, angry and withdrawn.

## Avoiding compassion fatigue

Becoming more self-aware is the first step to counter compassion fatigue. Ask yourself and those closest to you if you have been exhibiting any of the above warning signs. If so, then become more purposed in trying to be more helpful and useful in meaningful ways to others, to your agency and colleagues, and to your community.

Often remind yourself that compassion in your service is what gives meaning, purpose and fulfillment to your work. If you catch yourself not caring or wanting to make a positive effort, ask yourself, “*Why?*” If the answer is you just don’t care or that it’s not worth your time and effort, or that it won’t do any good — then think back to why you wanted to be an officer in the first place. Try to affirm the ideals that motivated you initially to want to be willing to sacrifice a part of yourself for the good of the country, community and those who need you.

I can attest from my 30 years in law enforcement, and from all the officers I’ve known, the most peaceful and contented officers who loved their job all throughout their careers were the ones who found meaningful ways to serve with compassion in doing as much good as they could.

Regarding the first cause of compassion fatigue in being steadfast with self-care, commit to the daily practice of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual wellness strategies. (See “Effective strategies to strengthen resiliency” by the author at [apbweb.com/2021/12/resiliency](http://apbweb.com/2021/12/resiliency).)

Regarding the second cause of compassion fatigue due to discouragement in the lack of positive outcomes, always strive to focus on *trying to do good and make a meaningful difference*, not on a specific outcome desired. It is the effort in the present moment that is helpful to the officer, not the outcome. If there happens to be a positive outcome, that’s just an extra bonus. In the midst of a call for service, ask yourself, “*What good can I do here?*” Then do what you can without any expectation of an outcome.

Many times, officers tend to hope for specific positive outcomes as a result of their actions, and when those don’t result, it’s natural to feel disheartened, disappointed and frustrated. Eventually, when this happens often enough, they can lose their desire to make an effort, believing no good will come of it and that it’s a waste of their time.

Always believe in your potential to do good while realizing you cannot control outcomes. We do good things with the hope these actions will have a lasting, positive influence. The reality is that they may or may not. Ultimately, that doesn’t matter. The greatest value, in the present moment, is intending to be helpful with purposed compassion. That effort will always result in strengthening your resilience, your job satisfaction and your fulfillment.

Good intentions and effort always support and improve wellness. They help keep one’s heart from suffocating and enable the heart to work for your greater good.

## Conclusion

Throughout your service, strive to remember the power of compassion to not only do good, but to keep you resilient, well and at peace. May you experience all the peace, joy and fulfillment that a professional life of compassionate service has to offer. ***(Article first appeared in American Police Beat Magazine. To view other published articles by Dan Willis, see <https://apbweb.com/author/dwillis/>)***

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