

## **Effective Strategies to Strengthen Resilience**

Officer safety, ethical and professional quality service, officer wellness and survivability, exercising sound judgment and decision making, recovery and healing from work traumas — all these are dependent upon a high level of resiliency.

One is not born with resiliency; it is learned, developed and strengthened over time by how an officer chooses to respond to challenges and traumas. Without it, officers are prone to overreact to stress, use excessive or unreasonable force, become burned out and unmotivated, and grow disengaged, ineffective, angry and frustrated or depressed.

### **What is resiliency?**

Resiliency is the capacity to recover from and respond to traumas and challenges in constructive ways that are productive of wellness. It enables an officer to respond in stressful or traumatic situations with conscious intention and reason in a calm and centered manner, rather than instinctively reacting out of raw emotion.

Officers need to be trained and supported in developing not only mental, but also physical, emotional and spiritual resiliency through practicing resiliency strategies daily, with every call, as described below. Resiliency is a way of reframing our challenges, of refusing to see ourselves as a victim or as helpless. It is becoming more mindful and present in using all our mental, physical, emotional and spiritual capacities to respond, recover and grow.

Traumatic, heart-wrenching, terrible and sometimes horrific things are going to happen to you throughout your career; that doesn't necessarily matter. What is critical is how you choose to respond to those traumas and challenges. How you choose to handle every call for service, every interaction you have throughout your entire career, every trauma you experience — all that matters in the long run. Every call matters and is an opportunity to practice wellness and to strengthen resiliency.

Peace officers who are resilient all have several things in common: They have good social support, see hits to their careers as challenges and not as crisis, are able to feel and express appreciation for the good in their lives, exercise good character and integrity, and consciously look at the glass as being half-full instead of half-empty. They are positive in their outlook, hopeful and purposeful in trying to turn a negative experience into something positive and useful for the greater good.

Resiliency is similar to physical fitness. You can become more resilient and fit daily if you focus on your need to manage the stress load in effective ways. If you are not proactive in developing your overall resiliency, then it will deteriorate over time. It's a constant effort, because every day officers experience work traumas that naturally tend to erode resiliency.

### **Strategies to develop resiliency**

A key to resiliency lies in the fostering of hope, which is intentionally believing that there is good. It is purposely trying to be the good amid all the bad, affirm and reinforce the good within you, and do as much good as you can in any given moment.

Another essential element of resiliency is intentionally training your mind by finding new ways to reframe your challenges. This means seeing yourself not as a victim, but as someone inwardly empowered to respond in ways that are helpful and constructive that will lead to positive outcomes.

A core pillar of resiliency is seeing every challenging moment as happening for you — an opportunity for you to practice coping, intentionally choose your character, practice and engage resiliency, and intentionally try to learn something from your experience with the intent of wanting to help someone else later who goes through the same challenge. If you look at the traumas and challenges of life and work in this way, then every difficult thing, every unfair thing, every traumatic thing, every horrible or negative thing only shows up to make you better.

Rather than instinctively reacting to challenges, traumas and disappointments by fighting, resisting or letting yourself become inwardly defeated, look upon them as a teacher that is there to enable greater resiliency, growth and character. There's a silver lining in everything, and we need to learn how to find it and benefit from it. The key to this is your mindset, your outlook, what you believe and what you look for. For whatever you seek from a given situation, you will find.

The following is the essence of strengthening resiliency from Carlsbad, California, Police Sergeant Ryan Opeka: “Regarding the numerous traumatic experiences I’ve had, whether it was as a child, in combat with the Marine Corps, or being a cop for several years with the slow, steady drip of trauma — I’ve learned how to harness those negative experiences and use them as motivation to do good, to come out better and stronger, and to respond to things that I was experiencing in the now with an advantage because I had gone through so many terrible things before.

“For years I’ve been involved in the martial arts, and one of the principles is using your opponent’s momentum against them and taking the energy that they are putting into the fight and flipping it around on them. I’ve recognized that I can do good with the bad things that are happening by constantly trying to use the momentum of a bad experience and flipping it around to make it a positive.”

## **Conclusion**

Resiliency needs to become a daily practice by developing the conscious intention to use every challenging and negative experience as motivation to do good, to learn, to practice wellness and to respond in constructive ways. As managers, we can exemplify that principle, help train it, and develop mechanisms of wellness and resiliency that enable officers to develop and practice it.

*(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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