

DEPRESSION WITHIN POLICE OFFICERS

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It seems today that you can't pick up a newspaper, read a magazine, listen to the radio or watch the TV without being pumelled by the relentless news: unemployment difficulties, economy problems and the sky is falling right for your head.

As if spending years under threat and looking over your shoulder wasn't hard enough as a police officer: it appears the difficulties and struggles could continue, even when you take the uniform off.

What to do? Consider the words of a TV Doctor who said, "Statistics mean nothing to the individual." This doctor knows, and you should know, that statistics are useful when describing large populations. But you are only one person and that number seems even smaller when you are a retired police officer and it feels like you are the only person that is feeling this way. Depression can show itself both psychologically and behaviourally. Psychologically it can trick the brain into having negative thoughts that are not accurate. "Nobody else could be feeling down, depressed or hopeless" and "It must only be you; nobody could be feeling this way." Behaviourally it can show itself in such ways as; no longer enjoying the things that you once enjoyed; sleeping too much or too little and avoiding leaving the house. Retirement is supposed to be enjoyable, fun and time to start doing all the things you thought about when you were on nightshift. Officers are reluctant to talk about it as well as they worry that would be viewed as a sign of "weakness" or you might be seen as a "failure" or less of a person even though it is a normal reaction to often abnormal experiences. So how do we cope? There is still a stigma in this country that it is okay to have a broken bone but as soon as you start to say you are mentally struggling, you are seen as different.

Statistics, they are a powerful thing and I would like to share some statistics about mental health and relate this to what I have seen in my career, working at PRRT. Northern Ireland has had the highest rate of suicide in the UK for a second year in a row. Since the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998, more people have taken their own lives in Northern Ireland than were killed during the troubles. People, specifically males between 40 and 60 are starting to become a bigger proportion of people who are taking their own life in Northern Ireland. So why is depression becoming such an issue around this age? Retirement can be a time of reflection. For police officers reflecting back on their service, the sacrifices, the risks and the losses and reflecting forward into a new unknown future. This can be an emotional time with simply too much time to think and too much to think about being an unhealthy combination. Feelings of isolation from colleagues and even family

can compound problems. Depression can be diagnosed as mild, moderate or severe. The quicker it can be recognised, the quicker it can be treated. If you have experienced the following symptoms for a two week period or more, you might be living with symptoms of depression:

- Loss of interest
- Loss of motivation/enthusiasm
- Lack of enjoyment
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Sadness/tearfulness
- Black/bleak outlook - unable to see positivity in future
- Difficulties making decisions
- Consuming guilt
- Low self-esteem
- Tiredness/lethargy
- Sleeping changes
- Appetite changes
- Loss of desire/sex drive
- Physical aches and pains
- Feeling anxious
- Self-harming or suicidal thoughts (in more moderate - severe cases)

Mental health problems were recently described as an epidemic in the UK. 1 in 4 people will suffer from symptoms of depression and if you spent your career as a police officer, you might also be experiencing symptoms of PTSD. Depression and anxiety difficulties go hand in hand but there is a solution. You are not the only person going through this. The Psychological Therapies Department at PRRT is set up specifically for retiring and retired officers and family members who are experiencing a range of difficulties. I know you are not alone because I and my colleagues have a large caseload with new referrals coming in every week. There is a stigma around mental health; I hear it all the time. But, just because you can't see it doesn't mean that it isn't there. No matter how big or small your difficulties are, if you are struggling, you have just as much right to come to a therapy session as anyone else. After all, what is the worst that can happen? Maybe a better question to ask yourself is, what is the best that can happen?

If you would like to speak to someone regarding accessing the Psychological Therapies service at PRRT please contact 02890 427788. If you would like to speak to someone urgently outside of office hours you can contact Trustcall - our 24 hour Confidential Telephone Counselling line - 0800 032 4802.

PRRT is based at Maryfield, Holywood and provides psychology, physiotherapy, personal development and training to the retired and serving police population. PSNI employees can access our healthcare services via referrals from PSNI occupational health. Serving officers can access personal development and training directly. For further information or to make an appointment please call 028 9042 7788 or email: servicesadmin@prrt.org.



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