

Preventing The 10 Deadly Errors

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September 1991: Deadly Error #8?

While off duty, in civilian clothes, and not wearing body armor, a deputy was buying gas at a convenience store when he saw a robbery occurring inside. After retrieving a handgun from his vehicle, he opened the door of the store and was immediately confronted by one robber who fired a .357-magnum handgun taken from a store employee. Mortally wounded in the head, the deputy died at the scene. Several days later, the subject was arrested and charged with murder.

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted, 1991 (Washington, DC, 1992).

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GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL...

Getting away from their high-stress jobs, a couple spends relaxing weekends in their motor home. When they found their peace and quiet disturbed by well-meaning, but unwelcome, visits from other campers, they devised a plan to assure themselves some privacy.

Now, when they set up camp, they place this sign on the door of their RV:

“Insurance agent. Ask about our term-life package.”

8) TOMBSTONE COURAGE

Some energetic officers have to be protected from themselves. Supervisors can take steps to help those officers who instinctively react to defend others without regard for their own safety. For example, departmental policy should require all officers to call in every motor vehicle stop and pedestrian contact, including the number of subjects encountered. Also, officers should have to report any suspected criminal activity.

Supervisors should identify dangerous locations in the community, easily measured by the number of assaults on officers or felony arrests emanating from a specific locale. Any officer responding to a call in that area automatically would receive backup. Supervisors should establish a staging site where the responding units could meet to coordinate their approach.

Dangerous areas in the community also should include businesses or factories with confined spaces or ones that store hazardous materials. Proactive officers may be drawn into a lethal situation if they enter these locations without the proper training or equipment.⁸

9) PREOCCUPATION

When Detective Brooks first identified the 10 Deadly Errors in 1975, he never could have

foreseen how technology would preoccupy law enforcement officers. These modern advances offer many benefits but also pose some risks. Departments should enforce strict rules as to what portable electronic devices officers need on patrol.

Unfortunately, most agencies have more to worry about than technological distractions. Stress, inherent in the profession, comes from many different areas. Surprisingly, dealing with hardened criminals is somewhat low on the list of what causes stress in officers' lives. Much higher on the list are unreasonable expectations from administrators, lack of proper training, failure to be recognized, marital problems, and shift work.

Departments should take a proactive approach to monitoring officers' stress. Many psychological tools can help accomplish this.⁹ Although not perfect, they would give agencies some idea of which members are under a great deal of stress away from the job. Administrators could correlate this information with what they know about their officers at work. Have they handled a fatal accident or had to deliver a death notification? Are they the target of an internal affairs investigation? Are they being sued? Have they worked a natural disaster? Have they been physically assaulted? Such information should enable agencies to identify officers under a great deal of stress.¹⁰ Failure to monitor an officer under this type of stress aptly illustrates the fifth Deadly Error, Missing Danger Signs.

Law enforcement should join other progressive professions in allowing personnel to use sick leave as “mental health” days. It is better to allow an officer under mounting psychological pressure to take a day off before it manifests as a physical illness or a poor use-of-force decision. As with all sick time, agencies would have to monitor these “mental health” days, but, if properly applied, they can reduce larger problems in the future.

10) APATHY

Apathy, probably the most insidious of the 10 Deadly Errors, contributes to each in varying degrees. It is hard to measure because it is a crime of omission, rather than commission. Still, departments must take steps to recognize apathy.

Supervisors can monitor some indicators to gauge if officers are becoming apathetic. These include what time officers arrive for work, how often they miss court, how long it takes them to respond to and clear a call, and how many miles they drive on patrol. Supervisors can check the evidence log to see who turns in the most and review the motor vehicle summons log to see how often each officer needs a new summons book. They can compare each officer against the standards set by the rest of the squad. Supervisors should ride along on calls to see if officers perform to departmental standards.

Reversing apathy poses some challenges. Supervisors may try to motivate officers by putting them in charge of a speciality that they may possess and having them develop a

lesson plan for roll call or by identifying an interest and sending them for additional training. Sometimes, the best recourse involves preventing these officers' attitudes from infecting the rest of the squad.

CONCLUSION

Some of the 10 Deadly Errors are physical mistakes and others are mental. Unfortunately, law enforcement trainers never can train officers for every situation they may encounter. But, by training them to remember these common dangers and to “think like a cop,” trainers can better educate officers for any situation.

Supervisors should review the 10 Deadly Errors on a regular basis—maybe at roll call on the 10th of every month. Only by constantly discussing these errors and the ways to avoid them will officers react correctly when tested. At that split second when their lives are threatened, officers will not recall some obscure lesson taught the first week of the academy.

Rather, they will rely on the information their supervisors and senior officers impart to them on a regular basis. If officers study the 10 Deadly Errors, they will have a proper tactical response prepared. Perhaps, over time, they will relegate these errors to a chapter in the profession's past and make the need for the heart-wrenching words *officer down, code three* obsolete.

Endnotes

¹ U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted 2004*, at www.fbi.gov.

² For additional information on officer safety, see Anthony J. Pinizzotto, Edward F. Davis, and Charles E. Miller III, U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Killed in the Line of Duty* (Washington, DC, 1992); *In the Line of Fire* (Washington, DC, 1997); and *Violent Encounters* (Washington, DC, 2006).

³ As a reminder, officers should pick an anniversary date (wedding, child's birth, academy graduation) and purchase a new container at that time.

⁴ For additional information, see supra notes 1 and 2.

⁵ Oftentimes, subjects will complain that handcuffs are too tight. Officers should take great care when inspecting handcuffs. In some cases, offenders have used this as a ruse to get officers to move in closer. For additional information, see supra note 2.

⁶ The National P.O.L.I.C.E. Suicide Foundation, www.psf.org.

⁷ That is, within a 10-foot radius of the offender. For additional information, see Anthony J. Pinizzotto, Edward F. Davis, and Charles E. Miller III, “Escape from the Killing Zone,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, March 2002, 1-7.

⁸ For additional information, see Shannon Bohrer, Edward F. Davis, and Thomas J. Garrity, Jr., “Establishing a Foot Pursuit Policy: Running into Danger,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, May 2000, 10-15.

⁹ For example, one such instrument, the Social Readjustment Rating Scale developed in 1967 by Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe, assigns a numerical value to life events, such as marriage, divorce, obtaining a mortgage, death of a family member, and birth of a child. A total score indicates how susceptible an individual is to physical or mental health problems from stress.

¹⁰ For additional information, see Donald C. Sheehan and Vincent B. Van Hasselt, “Identifying Law Enforcement Stress Reactions Early,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, September 2003, 12-17. ■

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