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“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”

**APPLYING CHRISTIAN PRINCIPLES TO MARRIAGE
ENHANCEMENT FOR FIRST RESPONDERS**

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Abstract

First responders, particularly police officers, encounter pressures and stressful situations as part of their daily work. Daily stress without a positive release has a detrimental effect on family relationships and marriages in particular. Spousal retreats help couples understand how to cope with the pressures that impact their marriage and assist in combating the negative effects of police work on families. Many of the principles utilized during these retreats encompass the values of forgiveness, love, patience, understanding, and the need to understand the relationship from the spouse's perspective. Inclusion of these spiritual values strengthens participants' interpersonal skills and encourages

commitment to their marriage relationship while maintaining respect for the spiritual diversity within the group.

Law enforcement is one of the most stressful of occupations (Ansel, 2000, p. 375). “Stress seems to come from four critical sources: the ambiguous framework in which discretionary decisions are made; the danger of dealing with lawbreakers, public suspicions and disdain; and the lack of community and organizational support” (Woody, 2006, p. 97). Police officers lead a “high-risk life-style” created by unpredictability, shift work, and physical danger (Depue, 1981).

Because of these stressors, law enforcement officers often undergo personality changes, which can contribute to marital problems. For example, correctional officers were found to carry certain attitudinal and behavioral characteristics from the job into their personal lives. These characteristics include “becoming increasingly authoritarian, controlling, demanding, chronically negative, critical, stingy with praise, showing a lack of emotion at home, except for hostility, development of self-righteous and opinionated attitudes” (Cheek, 1983, p. 18 & 24).

The results of some studies suggest that police work has an adverse impact on police families, particularly in terms of a spouse’s social life (Alexander & Walker, 1996). Alexander and Walker in 1994 found from a sample of police officers that 40% admitted taking out stress on their families. Stress from work becomes cyclical because

it affects the family in a negative way and creates family problems; these family problems, in turn, create stress for the officer that may create danger for the officer or others on the job. “Unhappiness in someone’s personal life and workplace burnout are thought to have significant influence on stress levels. This would include those situations where police officers are too physically and emotionally exhausted to deal with their spouse or significant other and they begin to treat family the way they treat suspects at work” (He, Zhao, & Archbold, 2002, p. 693). Other first responders also face similar challenges and stressors that can impact their marriages negatively.

In spite of the extraordinary challenges encountered on the job and the toll that these take on the families of law enforcement officers and other first responders, there are several barriers to seeking help. Perhaps the greatest barrier is the possibility that “the request for assistance would show up in their personnel files and adversely affect their advancement” (NYC Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association, 2000, p. 27). Webster and Lyubelsky (2005) report that “officers not wanting the stigma of a psychological disorder on their employment records,” overtly avoid professional services, view individuals outside their culture with suspicion, and are less likely to trust outsiders (p. 51).

Having a spouse who has a shared understanding of some of the difficulties involved in police work can reduce the negative emotional outcomes associated with such work (Thompson, Kirk-Brown, & Brown, 1998, p. 5). “There are indications that strong support systems and effective coping skills can improve the officer’s ability to function effectively on the job and reduce tension at home” (Ussery & Waters, 2006, p. 68).

First Responders Healthy Marriage and Family Program

Recognizing that there was a high incidence of divorce among his officers and that stress and difficulties at home can affect an officer's ability to perform his duties safely, Police Chief Gary Westphal of Mesquite, Texas sought to create a program to increase spousal awareness and create better communication between police officers and their spouses. Mesquite is a suburb city of Dallas in Dallas County which has a population of over 2 million. Chief Westphal engaged social work professors with extensive experience in clinical practice to create and coordinate the program.

The program coordinators began by developing a needs assessment, which was administered to the Mesquite officers and their spouses who agreed voluntarily to participate in the study. Officers and spouses were asked to complete the needs assessment anonymously. Questions on the needs assessment were based on a review of literature focused on law enforcement marriages. The review of the literature and results of the survey were then used to develop the first phase of the project, a spousal marriage enrichment retreat program that addresses identified needs.

Following the success of the Mesquite pilot project, several police chiefs in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex indicated their interest in the expansion of the study to include their law enforcement personnel. Twelve departments are now committed to providing marriage education for their personnel through this program, and personnel from eight police departments have now participated. The program will soon be expanded to other areas of the state.

The primary goal of the program is to provide marriage education for law enforcement officers and their spouses that will enhance marital satisfaction and increase marriage skills. A secondary goal is to reduce the number of divorces in the high risk

population of law enforcement officers and first responders through the introduction of marriage education specifically developed to meet the needs of this special population. The program has a unique approach in that it addresses aspects of work culture and the manner in which it impacts family culture. While the initial phase of the expansion focuses on law enforcement families, the applicability of the principles will be tested with other first responders, such as fire fighters and the military, as the project expands. The ongoing strategy is to build a strong foundation and research base upon which an expanded program could develop by progressively moving out from the DFW Metroplex to other counties and regions of Texas. The program goals and objectives directly coincide with the stated allowable activities for Healthy Marriage Initiative demonstration projects of the Administration of Children and Families.

The project coordinators are working in cooperation with The Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas (LEMIT) at Sam Houston State University, considered to be the largest and most sophisticated statewide preparation program for police management in the United States, with the mission of serving the law enforcement profession through education, research, and training. The Institute of Law Enforcement Management and the Department of Family and Community Services of the Texas Health and Human Service Commission also support the project.

Findings of the Needs Assessment

During the initial needs assessment, officers completed 74 surveys, and spouses of officers completed 81 surveys. The average age of officers completing the survey was 37 and the average age of the spouses completing the survey was 35. The couples were married an average of eleven years. The population was predominately Caucasian, and

all of the officers were male. The average educational level for the officers was two years of college. For the spouses, it was 3 years of college. The majority of those completing the survey had two children living at home. This same needs assessment has been given again to each officer and spouse attending the weekend retreats.

The needs assessment revealed that many of the problems identified in the review of the literature were experienced by law enforcement families in the Dallas, Texas area. The couples had the same attitudes toward roles in marriage found in a study by Hertz & Charlton (1989). Hertz and Charlton reported that couples took a “traditional stance regarding the meaning of marriage and the expected roles of husband wife. Respondents expressed willingness to do ‘whatever it takes’ to approximate their view of a proper marriage, including sacrificing sleep, and doing conventional things at unconventional hours...even when wives worked outside their homes—a proper marriage was characterized by a very clear division of roles: husbands are ‘providers’ whose principle responsibility is supporting the family: wives are ‘homemakers’ who clean, cook, and care for husbands and children” (Hertz & Charlton, 1989, p. 496).

The officers reported one of the most difficult parts of their jobs was shift work and time away from family and spouse. The spouses agreed, stating that their major difficulties with police work are time away from family, time commitments to job, dealing with shifts, and feeling like a single parent. See Table 1 below.

Table 1: Stressors

Stressor	Police Officers	Spouses
Lack of Family Time	59.5%	63.0%
Missing Family Events	53.1%	55.5%
Officer gives more energy to the job than home	40.5%	51.8%

Inadequate income-spouse has to work	58.1%	70.3%
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The officers reported that they are disturbed by the attitude of the general public toward policemen, which makes their jobs difficult. They said there is a lack of understanding and respect by the general public: “They think we are all fat, lazy, donut-eating monsters.” “The public thinks that police work is like what they see on TV.” They objected to “rude people with negative attitudes toward law enforcement.”

The spouses complained about the lack of openness in their marriages and the officers’ inability to communicate and share emotions with their spouses. Spouses complained: “He expects the family to be perfect or talks down to me, rather than as an equal, talking to me in the same manner he would a prisoner.” Spouses also complained because the officers “tend to stay in “police mode” and find it “hard to leave the badge at work.” Other spouses observed a changed personality—callousness and lack of joy. See Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: Communication Issues

Issue	Police Officers	Spouses
Ability to discuss stressful events with spouse	55.6% Agree	70.4% Agree
Stress increases likelihood of yelling at family	12.2% Agree	34.6% Agree
Communication between spouse and officer is an issue	55.4% Agree	50.6% Agree

Table 3: Perceived conflict levels over physical and emotional intimacy

Police Officers	Medium	High
Physical Intimacy	21.6%	12.2%
Emotional Intimacy	28.4%	18.9%

Spouses	Medium	High
Physical Intimacy	25.9%	17.3%
Emotional Intimacy	29.6%	24.7%

As shown in the charts, spouses reported a higher conflict between both physical and emotional intimacy than the police officers. Some of the spouses wrote about the concern they felt for the safety of their spouse. This subject frequently has been brought up during the retreat, as the spouses share their deep concern for the safety of their officer-spouses while they are at work. This causes continual worry and stress with no real outlet for the spouses.

Law Enforcement Spousal Healthy Marriage Retreats

In order to address the needs identified by the officers and their spouses, groups of twelve officers and their spouses are invited to a retreat lasting from Friday evening through Sunday morning. Through training programs, seminars and retreats in close proximity to the participants' place of residence, marriage education is made more accessible and will better relate to the reality these couples face in day-to-day life.

The retreats combine officers from three to four departments, which has helped create a sense of the universality of the issues that affect law enforcement couples. Each department pre-registers the attendees and pays for the entire weekend for the officer and his/her spouse. Both male and female officers have participated voluntarily in the sessions with their spouses. The retreats are scheduled in a hotel or facility away from the officer's work domain. The highest ranking official at any retreat has been a sergeant. The importance of confidentiality is covered and each participant signs an agreement of confidentiality. The officers know that the matters they discuss should not impact their

job position. The department sponsorship of these retreats helps the spouses to know that the department is invested in helping their marriages.

The review of the literature and the results of the needs assessment were used to develop the curriculum used during the retreats. The curriculum includes several areas related to healthy marriage education and combines these with issues faced by families of first responders. A primary focus is education concerning the unique stressors that these families deal with and the relationship of depression and anxiety to stress. Stress management techniques are presented, as well as the symptoms associated with a level of stress that is too high. The characteristics that bring success at work and the characteristics that promote healthy family relationships are discussed. The curriculum also includes problem solving skills and communication skills. Gender and personality differences that can cause conflicts are applied and related to the area of finances. Special emphasis is placed on meeting the needs of your partner, sharing emotions, developing your friendship, and communicating love. The participants discuss forgiveness and boundary setting for the protection of the marriage relationship and the family. Many of the principles taught also apply to parenting issues.

A principal feature that separates the law enforcement spousal retreats from other marital enrichment programs is the incorporation of work (law enforcement) culture into the discussions of family culture. This perspective helps clarify the degree to which law enforcement values have influenced the family. Younger spouses, in particular, find this discussion valuable. Essentially, the spouses provide peer support for one another. There is very little research discussing the coping strategies spouses find helpful in managing the hardships of this unique profession (Maynard, Maynard, McCubbine, and Shoa,

1980). The opportunities for police spouses to interact with each other and to learn that some of the conflicts in their relationships are common to other police families gives the spouses confidence in their abilities to address the problem.

Many of the couples attending the retreat have had very little time together because of work and family schedules, and it is imperative that the time they spend at the retreat be a combination of both work and fun. On Saturday afternoon, the couples are given an opportunity to discuss and “problem solve” the issues that have surfaced during the early part of the retreat. They are then instructed to change their focus from that discussion to spending the rest of the evening having fun and sharing in a supportive, encouraging manner. The retreat facilitators emphasize that the couples need to schedule separate times for fun and for problem solving.

Incorporation of Spirituality and Values in Marriage Education

Issues of separation of church and state must be taken into consideration when providing services for government employees or recipients. There must be a clear distinction between faith-based providers and non-faith-based providers. Spirituality must be addressed appropriately and in accordance with social work ethics. A principal concern for all social workers should be respect for diversity, including the area of spirituality and self determination. Each participant brings to the marriage education retreat their own spiritual convictions and values that affect the role and importance of spirituality in their lives. In this type of setting, there should not be, nor can there be, any coercion or attempts to convert individuals to a particular religion or philosophy. Police departments and other government agencies cannot support a program that explicitly propagates a certain religious point of view.

However, holistic intervention/treatment is a basic tenet of the social work profession, and spirituality is an integral aspect of many people's lives. One's identity is often linked to beliefs about right and wrong. Likewise, spiritual beliefs help determine the areas of life in which a person attaches meaning. Some officers and spouses participate in the retreats at a time when they have run out of options, resources, and hope for their marriage. Many of the participants draw support through their faith group, and it is useful to consider using those resources to assist with healing and rebuilding hope. Likewise, one's spiritual perspective can keep an individual from despair and from acts of desperation. A person's spiritual beliefs can also cause difficulties if one is experiencing unresolved guilt or despair over specific actions or, more generally, the course that life has taken when these are in conflict with spiritual values. Religious views must be understood and conceptually integrated into practice by clinicians if social workers are to be effective professionals (Kudlac, 1991). Because of their holistic perspective, social workers, in particular, should be equally prepared to respond to their clients' spiritually related concerns as they are to respond to their other concerns (Dudley & Helfgott, 1990).

As the meaning of spirituality has been explored, it has become more evident that spiritual beliefs are often tied to values. Values help determine our actions. Rowena Fong and Sharon Furuto (2000) in *Culturally Competent Practice* indicate that mental health and human service professionals need to develop an understanding of how values drive a person's life and influence the decisions that one makes. Therefore, the program coordinators incorporated a values based approach to address aspects of spirituality at the retreats. Christian principles and values are the primary basis for the marriage education

curriculum used at the retreat. However, it should be noted that these values are common to many major world religions and philosophies and are found in their sacred writings and treatises. The following values are taught during the spousal retreats to assist couples in understanding how they can improve their relationship.

Gratitude and Appreciation

Couples are encouraged to express appreciation for each other and to focus on the qualities that first brought them together. They are led in activities which assist them in understanding what their spouses need in the relationship and then jointly explore practical changes in every day life that will help them better meet each others' needs. The couples discuss the importance of learning not to take the sacrifices made by their spouse for granted. The use of positive reinforcement rather than negative comments is encouraged.

Honesty/Trust

The foundation of a healthy relationship is trust. The importance of clear communication, which involves disclosure and openness, is emphasized. The discovery of hidden information or actions can have a profound negative impact on a relationship and shake the foundation upon which it was built. At times, this type of discovery causes the spouse to question every area of the relationship and the character of the individual he or she married. Relationships are in trouble when there is limited trust and dishonesty. The decision as to whether or not to disclose or discuss certain information is at times difficult for individuals in certain professions that require confidentiality. At times, a spouse will have to trust that an officer is not able or willing to share some of the trauma he or she has experienced on the job. However, being available when and if the officer

tries to share is necessary. The couples learn about debriefing and defusing so they can offer this help to each other.

Love

The various types of love and the expression of love are presented as a foundation for continued discussion between spouses. Through various activities, they learn how to communicate love, respect, and appreciation in ways that are especially meaningful to their spouses. They are given practical suggestions as to how to keep their relationship alive in spite of busy schedules and long hours of separation. The following tips by Ellen Kirschman are used to help police officers and spouses adjust to their difficult work schedule and still make their relationships a priority.

- Verbally agree about the importance of the family unit and hold each other to those agreements
- Talk about what you value in life.
- Respect each other's needs
- Balance personal needs with those of your spouse
- Communicate with your mate
- Learn to fight fairly
- Spend quality time together and with the children having fun (Kirschman, 2007, p. 17-18).

At the retreats, couples are taught about a pattern of interacting that is called “the negative fight cycle.” Couples learn the symptoms that indicate a negative trend in their relationship. They are asked to reflect on how they handle conflict and how they talk to each other during disagreements. The couples are then given some problem-solving steps

and asked to work on a real minor and solvable problem during the retreat so they can have some positive results to take with them as they return home.

Mutual Respect and Kindness

Respect involves spouses keeping their friendship alive through caring communication and shared activities. Retreat participants learn that in order to show respect they must understand each other's "preferences, aspirations, hopes, and gripes.....do little things for each other or express interest in each other's everyday lives" (Kirschman, 2007, p. 214). It is also critical to listen to and respect each other's right to have his or her own opinion. Discussions should have a positive focus and lead to greater emotional and physical intimacy. This involves treating others as you want to be treated. Character building is an ongoing process, and each spouse should be willing to recognize and focus on their spouse's positive characteristics while encouraging growth in needed areas of change. At the retreats, couples are asked to think about the importance of their friendship and to remember the qualities they appreciated in each other when first building their relationship. In order to further strengthen their friendship, they are asked to develop a list of activities they both find enjoyable. They are then encouraged to make a commitment to spend time each week with each other doing fun things that will keep the friendship and humor alive in their relationship.

Forgiveness

The topic of forgiveness is addressed in the final session of the retreat. Couples are encouraged to assume responsibility for attitudes and actions that have caused separation and hurt within the relationship and to express sincere regret for the pain caused. Principles of forgiveness that can lead to reconciliation and renewal of the

marriage commitment are explained. The goal is to prevent ongoing bitterness and promote loving interactions and support. Participants are encouraged to focus on resolving any unsettled issues from the past or present that might interfere with a growing relationship. Couples are asked to listen to each other without judgment and to work on putting negative experiences behind them so they can continue to build a healthy, satisfying life together. The importance of boundary setting for the protection of the marriage relationship and the family is also discussed. At the end of the retreat, each couple is asked to draw their dream “home” together and to talk about the value they place on their home, family, and each other.

Evaluation and Implications for Social Work

Both quantitative and qualitative research continues to be conducted as part of the ongoing process to develop evidence-based practice interventions with first responders and their families. Changes and additions to the curriculum have been and will continue to be made as data is gathered. At each retreat, a pre and post test is administered to determine the effectiveness of both the lecture content and each activity. Participants fill out an evaluation form related to their personal experience at the retreat. The results to date have been highly favorable, and the couples have indicated in their evaluations that they have found the content enlightening and also enjoyed the time together. The qualitative data shows that the activities help the officers and spouses relax and feel comfortable with one another.

The focus during the retreats has been both problem solving and emotional-focused coping (Beehr, Johnson, & Nieva, 1995). The goal has been to help couples determine which activities create and alleviate stress and to find a way to include more of

the stress relieving activities into their lives. Coping strategies that seem to be well-received by both the officers and spouses are meditation and relaxation. Some of the spouses have mentioned the importance of religion and extended family as the basis of outside support to help them cope with their stressors.

The spouses, in particular, find the retreats helpful and express gratitude for the interest their police chiefs and their departments have shown in the personal lives of the officers and for the assistance offered to them. It is especially meaningful for the spouses that the chiefs recognize how difficult it is to combat the stresses of law enforcement in the home. Support from the work place can help couples and families on two levels: (1) it can provide the employees with the feeling that the organization is concerned about their well-being, and (2) employees know these programs are available if they are needed even if they don't use them (Youngcourt & Huffman, 2005, p. 144).

There have been six weekend retreats since April 2005, and there is hope of obtaining continued funding from outside sources so the program will continue to grow and expand. The Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas (LEMIT) has helped cover the costs of the retreats by paying the instructor's fees for the past three retreats. Follow-up reunions with group sessions are being planned to provide opportunity for review and the sharing of additional material. Each couple will be able to discuss the changes in their relationship since the retreat. Some of the spouses have suggested the need for spousal support groups to give them a chance to continue to interact with each other. These support groups are still in the planning stages, but are a definite possibility. Participants also requested that the program expand to include retreats or conferences for

their children, who also share in the challenges of having a parent who is a first responder.

While most previous studies focus on the negative impact of vocational stress on law enforcement officers and their families, there is a great need for research to investigate the factors that might provide positive support for these individuals and their families and that also increases the likelihood of long-term marital and familial satisfaction. The development of interventions, specifically marriage education focused specifically on improving the lives of those who serve their community and our nation, is a critical first step in this process.

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