

THE BIG THREE:

Maintaining Psychological Armor in the Face of Acute, Complex and Vicarious Trauma in First Responders

BY MICHAEL GENOVESE, M.D., J.D., WILLIAM MAZUR, AND JOSEPH COLLINS



Every first responder wears armor. Only this isn't Kevlar. It's the psychological armor that shields them from the violence, brushes with death, and lack of humanity they encounter throughout their careers.

Imagine that you're a warrior riding into battle, the hefty weight of your armor a comfort as enemy combatants close in. Each piece wrapped around your limbs is crafted with precision, the fire and piercing teeth carved into the steely surfaces conjuring nightmares from grim bedtime stories.

You engage with the conviction years of training have afforded you, knowing that hesitation can be the difference between life and death. Your training is your first line of defense between you and the enemy. The last? The armor you trust protects you from blades, fiery explosions, and shrapnel.

Training may have made you a warrior, but armor has made you a force to be reckoned with.

PSYCHOLOGICAL ARMOR AND TRAUMA

Every first responder wears armor. Only this isn't Kevlar. It's the psychological armor that shields them from the violence, brushes with death, and lack of humanity they encounter throughout their careers. Kept intact, that armor supports a first responder's mental health in the face of some of the most harrowing situations.

If that armor becomes damaged, a first responder's mental health risks injury in the same way their body does.

These experiences can impact first responders differently, culminating in three types of trauma: acute, complex, and vicarious. Acute trauma has the potential to blow a first responder's armor right off, leaving them completely vulnerable to depression, anxiety disorders, addictions, and suicide.

Complex trauma pulls a first responder's armor off piece by piece throughout the course of their career. One call might peel off their arm plate. A decade later, another call might make their chest plate slide off. A few years later, they might lose a shin piece. Before they know it, they have no protection left.

Vicarious trauma occurs when a first responder is harmed by watching someone they care about lose their armor while in the line of duty. Their partner, teammate, or supervisor might have suffered acute or complex trauma, but they don't have the resources to help that person get back to where they were.

Sadly, the culture that has given law enforcement officers the power to do their jobs so well has taught them that these risks come with the job. While first responders help the rest of the world navigate trauma, they tuck their own trauma away somewhere quiet. Somewhere it can't make any noise.

They convince themselves that what they experienced wasn't trauma, because they don't have time for trauma. There's a call on the radio. The alarm is going off. Someone needs help. But this has left a gaping hole in their arsenal of protection, and first responders across the country are finding themselves struggling in ways they didn't realize were possible. An estimated 85% of first responders have experienced symptoms of a mental health condition, and first responders are up to five times more likely than civilians to struggle with depression and posttraumatic stress. Tragically, first responders like police officers and firefighters also are much more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty.¹

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GETTING YOUR ARMOR BLOWN OFF

Raul Rivas knows what it means to get your armor blown off. His actions ended the violence at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, back in June 2016. The night of the call, Rivas was a 23-year veteran of the Orlando Police Department who had about 15 years of SWAT experience. It wasn't his first call of the night, but even with his years of experience mentally preparing him for what greeted him when he walked through the nightclub doors, something still gave him pause: little flashing lights. Not dance floor strobe lights. Smartphone lights flashing like lighthouses in the dark.

"The phones are everywhere and they're all ringing," said Rivas. "That's somebody's mom. That's somebody's sibling trying to call them. It let me know what we were dealing with and what [the shooter] was willing to do."

What started as an active shooter situation quickly turned into a barricaded gunman. The threat then escalated to five potential bombs, one of which appeared to be attached to the gunman's vest. Up against insurmountable odds, Rivas and his team started to face the possibility that they might not get out alive.

"[My team and I are] getting comfortable with dying. We've almost made it, and we're going to die at the very end," said Rivas. "You've got to make peace with your maker that you might die doing this job. I always know that I might go through a door and catch a bullet. We had to get comfortable that night that we might blow up."

The gunman came out shooting, and Rivas, along with several other SWAT team members, took him out. Although the bomb threats were credible, none were found that night.

LOSING ARMOR PIECE BY PIECE

For Rivas, events like Pulse nightclub are part of the job, so he tucked it away like any other call and carried on with his life. The increasing irritability, drinks poured to ease the stress, and sleep broken up by night terrors all seemed like things every cop dealt with.

It wasn't until months later that Rivas' father, a Vietnam veteran and someone who was familiar with the impact of trauma, recognized that something was wrong and encouraged him to do something about it. So, Rivas sought the help of mental health professionals.

In doing so, Rivas made a crucial discovery. While there's no denying that the Pulse event was acutely traumatic, it wasn't the only trauma he had suffered throughout his career. He had been losing pieces of his psychological armor over the years without even knowing it.

"I didn't talk about the bad stuff before [the] Pulse [nightclub shooting], and it was all building up," said Rivas. "My trash can was full way before Pulse even happened."

Doug Monda knows exactly what it feels like to keep losing pieces of psychological armor. Now retired, Monda previously served as an undercover narcotics agent and a SWAT team member for the Cocoa Police Department in Brevard County, Florida.

An incredible number of things can happen over the course of a 20-year career in law enforcement, and many often become etched into the memories of the officers called to respond. Monda can recall countless moments that impacted him throughout his time as a first responder.

A 12-year-old girl hit by a car and killed the day before Christmas. Regular shootings in a high-crime area. Robberies, homicides, and rapes amidst the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

Then, an injury suffered in the line of duty put a temporary stop to his career. Monda suffered a broken back and traumatic brain injury after being hit by an 11-year-old who stole a truck.

It was the physical pain of that injury that led to unbearable mental anguish for Monda. After multiple surgeries that left 27 screws holding his body together, he felt life as he knew it slipping away. Once a professional soccer player, triathlete, and warrior by trade, Monda was relegated to a wheelchair and needed nurses to support his daily living activities.

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He didn't have a name for it at the time, but depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress started to set in. And although his body began to heal and he was able to return to duty, the mental pain remained, becoming so overwhelming that Monda almost died by suicide. Twice. It was a coworker's smile that stopped him the second time.

As Monda arrived on-scene to assist a coworker with a call for a physical altercation, the coworker stood there waiting for Monda in the parking lot, smiling at him. "That smile changed my life that day," said Monda. "It reminded me that he loved me, he was my friend, and I didn't want him to deal with my suicide that day."

His fellow warrior knew that something wasn't right, and Monda found him, other fellow SWAT team members, and his chief waiting for him in his office later that day. With their encouragement, Monda sought help for the depression and suicidal thoughts that nearly took his life.

IT'S LIKE WALKING A TIGHTROPE

With nearly 30 years of law enforcement experience under his belt, Paul Butler knows a thing or two about how being a first responder can damage a person's psychological armor.

Butler made history as the youngest police chief in South Carolina at the age of 22, also serving as a training officer, sergeant, crisis negotiator, and chief deputy for the Aynor Police Department. But while those around him developed addictions, got divorced, or suffered early deaths, Butler seemed unaffected.

"I realized a lot of my friends did struggle. We were on the same scenes, and I wondered why it didn't affect me the same way," said Butler. "[Other law enforcement officers] all respond with the same superficial answer, 'You don't have a heart. You don't have compassion. You

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It isn't always easy for first responders to get the right kind of treatment as soon as they need it. There can be a lot of red tape to cut through, along with the fear that seeking mental health treatment might mean that your colleagues may never look at you the same again.

don't care.' There's no one who cares as much as I do. I knew that wasn't it."

It was a conversation with Lewis Schlosser, Ph.D., APBB, managing partner at the Institute for Forensic Psychology, at a law enforcement conference that offered Butler some much-needed perspective. Troubled, Butler asked Schlosser for a diagnosis. Instead, Schlosser asked him a series of questions:

- Do you love your mom and dad?
- Do your mom and dad love you?
- Do you think that your spouse loves you?
- Do you think that your children will be there holding your hand when you're on your deathbed?
- How long have you known your oldest, dearest friend? Could you call them, and would they be there for you?
- Do you believe in God or a higher power?

Butler answered *yes* to every question.

But Butler is the exception, not the rule. Schlosser revealed that most people don't have positive answers to all those questions, and he told Butler that he was blessed with the opportunity to be a safety net for others who don't have the resources he did.

That flipped on a switch for Butler. He now believes that every first responder is walking a tightrope, and their ability to make it across amounts to the kind of safety net they have beneath them.

"When you first get into [a job in law enforcement], it's really easy. You can see the platform and can jump back," said Butler. "The farther you get along, you're in the middle [of the tightrope] all alone, and something will inevitably shake that rope."

Butler said what safety net a first responder sees when they look down can make all the difference in their life. Do they have a spouse or children they can turn to? Is an old friend always going to pick up the phone? Can they reach for a higher power to give them strength?

"People who don't have [safety nets], all they see is death and destruction," Butler said. "What they do is try to create safety nets. Pills, alcohol, porn, whatever promises to be there if they fall. But the holes [in the net] are so big that you'll fall right through them."

Butler credits his ability to navigate the challenges he faced throughout his career with the safety nets waiting to catch him if he fell. And just like Monda's coworkers were a safety net for him, first responders need to be safety nets for each other.

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“First responders need to be better about being that safety net,” said Butler. “Get close enough to your people — your peers, supervisor, support staff members — to ask questions about their families, childhoods, and their faiths. Not to judge or bully them or convince them to do things your way but to know where they’re missing a safety net or where their net is strongest so that you can steer them toward the net they need to fall on.”

MAINTAINING YOUR PSYCHOLOGICAL ARMOR

As Rivas and Monda can attest, it isn’t always easy for first responders to get the right kind of treatment as soon as they need it. There can be a lot of red tape to cut through, along with the fear that seeking mental health treatment might mean that your colleagues may never look at you the same again.

But law enforcement is a family. A brotherhood and sisterhood in which each person wants the best for their siblings.

Throughout their careers, first responders will likely encounter all three types of traumas, so finding healthy ways to cope is crucial to maintaining your psychological armor. Many people who enter this field turn to exercise, but other options can be as simple as talking to a friend outside of the profession.

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Monda stressed the importance of caring for the mind just as much as the body. “We spend most of our time training with our fists and our guns, [...] but it’s really important that you get as much mental training as you do physical,” said Monda. “I spent most of my career and all my life being an athlete [...] and never focused on my head, and that is the best component. Make sure your mind is right and you’re happy.”

Watching out for your brothers and sisters is also key. Butler said that any departure from their typical behavior could be a sign that they’re struggling.

“If they are super talkative and become quiet. Are they super quiet and become talkative? If they are dependable and become undependable or the other way around,” said Butler. “This should cause us to want to look closer and find out what’s making them tick.”

When another first responder is struggling, it can be tempting to try to give them advice or reassure them that

everything is going to be fine. But it’s usually best to just listen. Let them know that you’re there and can help them find support.

“Encourage everybody to take better care of themselves. You only get one life, so live it as best you can,” said Monda. “Be happy. Make sure that your loved ones are OK. Ask them all the time and make sure that you smile at them and tell them that you love them. Those are the important things.”

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ENDNOTE

1. Kennedy-Hansen, H. (2020, November 18). How employers can help first responders stay mentally and emotionally strong. Kaiser Permanente. <https://business.kaiserpermanente.org/insights/mental-health-workplace/first-responder-support>.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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