BLUE PEAK
RELIEF + RESILIENCE + WHOLE PERSON CARE

Reflections from the Other End of the Line:
A Love Letter to All First Responders, Those Who Love Them, and Those Who Lead Them

~ Frankie Jo McNallan

For the last 7 years, I have been the person on the other end of the phone on over 700 calls from firefighters, police officers, deputies, dispatchers, jailers, flight medics, and corrections officers, either struggling or in crisis from the effects of their career as a front-line worker.

Most often they do not know what is wrong with them but are looking for answers. Someone to validate that they are not going crazy. Someone to help put a name to the feelings they cannot explain within their head, within their soul, their being. Someone to explain why the rollercoaster of emotions, dark thoughts, and feelings of dread and bad behaviors will not stop.

"I can't shut my brain off."
"I cannot get the little 2-year-old boy's face out of my mind."
"I am angry and agitated all the time without any reason."
"I am anxious and tremble when I hold my infant granddaughter."
"I am arguing with my spouse constantly."
"I scream at my children….. for no reason."
"I am so sick of the frequent flyers, people just piss me off…. ALL of them!"
"My drinking has increased, and I know I need to address it."
"My wife is done with me and wants a divorce."
"I do not remember the last time I felt Joy or Hope."
"I look in the mirror and I do not know who I am."
"I feel like I am going crazy!!"
"I feel numb."

Many will call with relationship troubles, the inability to get a good night's sleep, an awareness of an increase in alcohol use, a single horrific incident response or series of responses they cannot get past, or being angry every single day, with the claim it has nothing to do with their service as a First Responder. I will tell you this…… it has EVERYTHING to do with your service as a First Responder!

There is a name for all of that confusion….. the rollercoaster of emotions, dark thoughts, feeling of dread and bad behaviors. It is called <u>THE PRICE OF BEING A FIRST RESPONDER.</u>
It is PTS – Post Traumatic Stress.

Many have been given the ultimatum from a spouse, partner or Chief: "Get help or you are gone."
If a responder cannot explain the confusion and turmoil they feel within themselves, how can they explain it to anyone else? Education is needed for so many combating this problem, starting with the responder and their leadership.

The responder needs education on how to understand what is going on with them, which will give them a voice and words to articulate their experience. It will also bring others to the table of understanding and support, and help their loved ones be an active part in their healing plan. The responder needs to have the ***want*** for healing to **find** the healing. It is hard for them to find the want when those who love or lead them do not understand.

Their loved ones also need this education for the same reason. With education comes awareness and this is often a proactive approach instead of a reactive or defensive response. Win WIN!

Loved ones are the best barometers to the responder's behavior and often are first to know when there is a problem. Responders need to listen openly to them instead of being defensive.

It is easy for spouses or significant others to say they don't want to hear about the day of their responder. Why would they want to hear about what their loved one has seen in their day's work? If they only knew that the hardest part of the day can often begin when they "leave work". The anxiety on the drive home, having to pass the intersections where the dead 2-year-old, who resembles their own son, was extricated from a crash. Many tell me that they are afraid to go to sleep because the faces of the 5 dead babies responded to in only 1 month. If loved ones only understood the toll that the trauma takes on responders' relationships with their spouses, significant others, children, co-workers and even themselves. The internal 24/7 conflict is intense since there is no "time off" for any first responder.

Equally important is the need for **Leadership and Administration** to have the same education. They first need to understand and then acknowledge that mental health crises are a real threat to their people. Leaders need to support them seeking help and healing. WHY??

Because it is **THE RESPONSIBILITY OF LEADERS to support their people** for
THE PRICE PAID FOR BEING A FIRST RESPONDER!

If a Fire Chief sees bad behavior from a firefighter, it often turns into an excuse for termination. They do not see it for what it is; it is easier to get rid of a difficult employee than help identify the underlying issues and guide them to seek help. The firefighter suffers in silence or pays the price when their actions and behaviors become unacceptable. A firefighter showed up to drill drunk, riddled with an ongoing mental health struggle and nowhere to turn. The seasoned guys told him to "toughen up and get over it". The call came in, but it was too late for help. The firefighter is no longer with us, by his own hand. True story.

A good teacher works to ensure their students achieve full comprehension of the topic at hand. A ***great*** teacher will ensure the <u>comprehensive</u> well-being of their student and understand that their performance is affected by both what happens at school and at home. A great teacher will work to find the <u>source</u> of any abnormal or unacceptable behavior and address it appropriately to the benefit of the student. * *Johnny punched a classmate at school today not because he is a bad kid, but because his parents' constant fighting at home is causing him anxiety and stress.*

Punch = symptom, home life = problem.

This is also the difference between a good chief and a **great** chief. A great chief will provide the best communication, opportunities, and resources for those in their care before "punishing" their responders for the symptoms that show up on the job.

Too often our responders are so far down the road of destruction by the time they call for help and irreparable damage has been done - to their relationships, families and to themselves. What they need more than anything is education to understand what is happening to them and why, as well as the support of their family, Chief and administration.

A Chief who provides no support or resources to their crews after a traumatic incident, or reaches out to to a struggling responder, is often in denial that mental health struggles are real. In my experience, those leaders, unfortunately, are often fighting their own emotional battles - unable to validate others because they haven't accepted their own. A city administration who provides no support (or bare minimum) to their first responders, especially when they ask for help, is not fulfilling their responsibility in their role as leaders because they are abandoning the needs of their employees.

It is easy for Leadership to dismiss the plea for help, they want to embolden responders to toughen up because it is part of the job. It is easy for city administration to make decisions sitting behind the safety of a desk or office, to leave the comfort of the job at 5pm and turn everything "work" off for the day until tomorrow. It is easy for them to look away from the **PRICE THAT IS PAID FOR BEING A FIRST RESPONDER.**

Your work becomes a part of you, it is woven into your being. You cannot unsee what you saw today, yesterday or the last 5, 15, or 40 years you have been responding to calls. You cannot "undo" it, it is simply there, every… minute… of… every… day.

I ask you this….. what is the alternative if the responder is let go from their service?
They are already off the rails, taking away all resources and support will only push them further into the darkness. **We will lose them forever**.

If a police officer is struggling mentally, they will do everything to keep it from their colleagues or leadership for fear it will become a fit-for-duty issue and they will have their gun taken away. So, they tell no one. They suffer in silence. Until the abnormal behavior is noticed by others. It is too late.

I have heard the stories firsthand, over 700 of them. You can kid yourself into thinking this is not true, the proof is on ***the other end of the line***.

I often hear from responders that say, "***It's time for me to be done***" or "***The old guys say I will know when it's time.***" **THIS IS A RED FLAG.** This is the worst time to quit. This says that their coping skills are overwhelmed and no longer work so they are going to throw in the towel. **STOP!** What they need is more understanding of what is really going on with them and why they feel this way. Quitting does *NOT* make the demons go away.

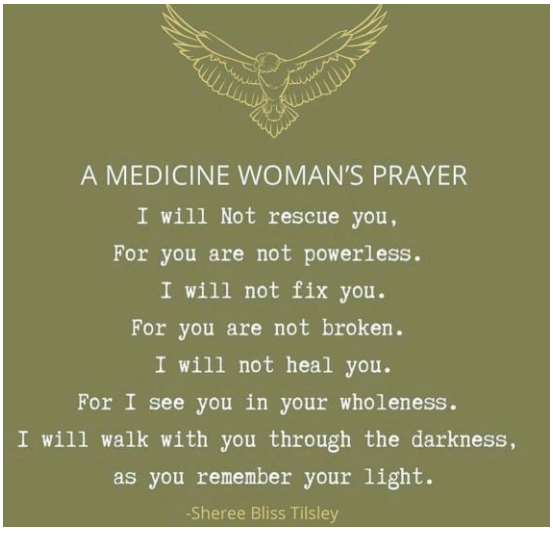
There is no need for any responder, NOT ONE, to suffer needlessly when the resources are available. **Consider all of our retirees,** who left the service in a state of overwhelm, who may be struggling from their years of service and dedication: **they never knew the price they would pay for being a responder.**

Most of the very best support that I have seen in working with struggling responders comes from spouses, partners and fellow responders who are educated or have already walked the journey themselves.

There is an increase in amazing Chiefs who work with us in our **PAR360 and HarborBlue Resilience Programs**. These dedicated leaders have supported their struggling responders and have worked hard to provide them with every resource and opportunity to find healing. My hat's off to all of them for showing commitment, support, and integrity to those they lead.

If your department is a PAR360 or HarborBlue Department, your Chief gets it!
You are already one step ahead and have all the resources you need. If you need help, please reach out and let's get you on the journey to address your struggles and start living your best life.

There are Beacons of Light in public safety, those people who are working to shine their light on responders in need. They use their light to help our responders find their way, give them the ability to recharge and shine their own light once again. Be a great **LEADER**, an amazing **RESPONDER**, a mental health **ADVOCATE……**be a **Beacon**, and shine your light!



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