

**Police Chief Magazine Column, an IACP Publication**  
**Focus on Officer Wellness: Educating the Police Spouse**  
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Imagine my surprise one evening while walking down a seedy street in Portland, Oregon with my family when my entire body froze and I began to shudder with fear. “Linda, let’s keep walking” my husband replied. I couldn’t move. I had just passed an alleyway that seemed as though it was the scene that I had created in my imagination, of my husband’s shooting many years prior.

My body was stiff as the scene replayed in my mind and right before my eyes. The sun was setting and the darkness was brewing, I could imagine the fight, bodies rolling around on the ground, fellow officer in training and her apprehension regarding getting involved and the eventual horror of the outcome. Simply paralyzed.

But, this wasn’t the same alleyway as my husband’s shooting- it wasn’t even in the same city or state. I thought at the time that it was just my mind playing tricks on me, because I had no other information to grab from to tell me otherwise. Until the day I sat in on Dr. Gina Gallivan’s ([helpforpolice.com](http://helpforpolice.com)) Peer Support Training class and she mentioned the signs and symptoms of Vicarious Trauma, otherwise known as Secondary PTSD or Compassion Fatigue.

Now, PTSD I knew about - I had done a fair amount of research while building the Huntington Beach Police Department’s Support for Officers’ Spouses group, but Vicarious Trauma was new to me. When I relayed what I had experienced during the eery evening in Portlan, Dr. Gallivan immediately empathized and indeed confirmed that my reaction is exactly what one would expect from a stored memory, even though I had no involvement in this situation. Just *hearing* the story of my husband’s shooting was enough for my mind to create the scene, the lighting, the sounds and the fear. I had never realized the memory had been stored until it replayed vividly in front of me that night.

I consider myself very fortunate and am well aware that not every police spouse has this opportunity. I was in a position that allowed me to receive training directly from a licensed clinical psychologist who specializes in police and public safety and is extensively trained in treating Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. I wish every spouse could receive the information they need to help understand the very special role we play as the spouse of an officer and how it can affect us.

With training under my belt and a 28 year police marriage that has lasted the test of time, I (along with my co-founder) began a Spousal Support group for our police department. We gather, we share information, we empathize with one another, we post helpful and educational articles, but most of all we know that if something happens - we have each other. Being known, understood and valued serves to be a priceless commodity that this group has offered to all.

Our Chief and his team have created a “Welcome Package” for all of the new officers to be handed out at the department’s “Swear In Ceremony”. We’ve given this team some basic verbiage on how and why our spousal support group was created and our contact information in

case their spouse or family member ever has any questions. Also included is a copy of the book, "I Love A Cop" and more information from the department's Peer Support Team regarding common signs and signals of a stress reaction.

This is what we've done in our little town of Huntington Beach, California, but it is imperative that we somehow *reach every spouse of every officer* with information that helps reduce anxiety and creates a basic knowledge of what to expect as a police spouse.

Here are some pieces of information that should be readily available in order to educate the Police Spouse in your department.

1. **The signs and symptoms of PTSD:** This information is imperative for the spouse to be aware of the physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses following a critical incident. The spouse is the first line of defense and sees what happens day in and day out. They have a well-rounded view of the officer and can make a judgement call as to whether his/her behavior has changed after a critical incident or has just changed over time due to the nature of the job.
2. **Ways of communicating with your officer:** The spouse should be given tips and guidelines at what this job entails. The officer may not want to talk about a work incident, they may also need some time to process when they get home from work. Just having this knowledge can create more of an understanding environment in the home. The spouse may also need to know a good way to bring up the idea of going to counseling or gaining mentor that can help the officer through the tough seasons, and encouraging the officer to reach out to the support phone lines available if needed.
3. **The signs and symptoms of Secondary PTSD:** Just hearing the traumatic incident or general day-to-day tough scenes your officer has been involved in or witnessed can create an emotional response of helplessness, fear, suffering and depression. Or, as in my case, can be stored and come out in situational fear and terror. Knowing that you are "normal" when these feelings arise can be so helpful when evaluating your emotional health and well-being.
4. **The possible feeling of isolation:** The spouse of an officer should be aware that not many friends will be able to relate to their new lifestyle and the changes that come with it. Family events will not always be attended, vacation dates have to change, even the places you frequent will be different and dependent upon the officer's comfort level. (Disneyland is not always the happiest place on earth)
5. **The training the officer has received:** When our officer is in the academy, we may get a partial blow-by-blow of what their day entailed, but there is so much more. The general idea of "combat" and the fact drilled into their heads that "you are the one going home tonight" is good, but creates an overwhelming power response. Typical disagreements may take more patience and may look a little different as the officer comes to terms with the "never be weak" mindset and that conflict looks different at work versus at home.

Educating the police spouse is a respectful way to address the sometimes confusing and all-encompassing police life we were brought into. The job of a police officer is not only their career, but it is the family's new lifestyle. Everything is different when a cop lives in the house, these pieces of information are what the family should be prepared for. The spouse is the first line of defense and having some key knowledge related to the life and job of an officer is imperative and can help save a marriage and a family.

Whether you place this information in a packet, a pamphlet, an email or a social media post - rest assured when you get the information out it will be well-received and may even become a rapport-building tool between you and the spouses, creating a more "family" environment within your department.

Police marriages can be strained, police families can be confusing and police shifts can leave the officer and the spouse drained. Let's put some form of education in place so that police marriages can stand on a solid foundation of knowledge and hope for a peaceful relationship.