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Living Through Troubled Times

> This moment we face is like no other in American policing. There has never been a moment in my career when the collective gaze and consciousness has been as fixed on policing as it is right now. We are experiencing what is arguably the most difficult and challenging time in American policing history.
>
> —Chief Terrence M. Cunningham

> We're asking cops to do too much in this country. . . . Every societal failure, we put it off on the cops to solve. Not enough mental health funding—let the cops handle it. Not enough drug addiction funding—let's give it to the cops. Schools fail—give it to the cops. . . . That is too much to ask. Policing was never meant to solve all of those problems.
>
> —David Brown, retired Dallas police chief

I started writing this chapter during the most turbulent period in police–community relations since the 1960s. A time filled with an endless stream of bad press about law enforcement, racial tensions, antipolice protests, mass shootings, terrorist threats, and the tragic ambushes of 8 police officers in just 11 days. Dash cams, body cameras, and cell-phone cameras have all charged the atmosphere and changed the way officers work, making the job look more dangerous and brutal than ever. Then just when you think things will never get better, there's a stream of good news: demonstrations of love and support from the public, cops and community members dancing together at a barbecue, heartwarming praise from unexpected sources on social media. The only thing that is predictable these days is change itself.

I am hopeful that by the time you read this chapter the situation will have turned for the better and needed changes will have been made. But if things aren't better or we are once again going through a turbulent period, I offer the following 10 ideas to help you and your family navigate troubled times whenever they arise.

1. Distinguish between what you can control and what you can't.

This first idea may be the most important, and is an underlying theme throughout this book.

My colleagues at the First Responder Support Network (FRSN) use a doughnut to model the distinction between what you can and can't control. In the doughnut hole are the only things over which you have control: your beliefs, your actions, your thoughts, your behavior, your ethics, and your professionalism. Controlling these things is not easy. We all have difficulty changing behaviors, breaking bad habits, and quieting the chatter in our heads that tells us things should be different from how they are and we should be different from how we are.

Now visualize the doughnut itself, the part you eat. This represents your sphere of influence. Influence is different from control. Our ability to influence others depends on how well we communicate and how skillfully we can negotiate relationships.

Outside the doughnut is the great wide world of things and people that affect us but over which, no matter how much we wish it were otherwise, we have little or no control. This is a tough one for cops to understand. Policing is all about control—control of people, situations, and emotions. Cops have to believe that they can establish control, or they couldn't do the job society asks them to do. It's a necessary belief, but sadly it's not always realistic. Cops don't control their chiefs, their politicians, the media, the criminals, or public opinion. They can influence but not control. You don't control these people or these things either.

2. Respond, don't react.

Reactions tend to be emotional, immediate, and intense, and are often fueled by fear or anger. (Anger is a secondary emotion. If you dig around in your anger, you'll likely find fear or hurt.) Reactions create trouble for ourselves and the people around us because they are reflexive rather than

well thought out. After the tragic murders of police officers in Dallas and Baton Rouge, families and officers universally reacted with increased fears about safety. Quitting the job was on many minds. These fears are normal. It's important to talk about them with each other, your children, and other LEO spouses. Be patient with yourself and your loved one. Make sure to listen, rather than react. Home is the one place no one should have to put on a brave face. Avoid pressuring your mate to quit or making any decisions out of fear. Do what you can to support each other even when you see things differently. Determine what each of you needs and how best to provide it. If there was ever a time to put family first, this is it.

3. Take the long view.

We have been through periods of unrest and hostility toward law enforcement before. Right now it feels like the bad times will never end, but they have and they will again. While it is cold comfort, the recent string of police murders is an alarming aberration. In 2013 firearm-related deaths of officers reached their lowest point in over 100 years.

Change takes time, sometimes generations. And it happens on many fronts. Short of a cataclysmic event there is rarely any single person, institution, or action that can generate big societal changes. Uniformed services, in general, are bound by tradition and often resistant to change. There are many changes taking place in these tumultuous times and more to come in the future. Whether it's something new or something disturbing, ask yourself, will this matter in five hours, five days, five years? If so, how, and over what part of the change do I have control? Then go look at a doughnut.

4. Take the big view.

Police routinely underestimate the support and respect they have in their communities. On the other hand, communities could do a much better job of showing their support. Once-a-year award banquets given by civic organizations are nice, but cops need community support on a daily basis. There is evidence that this is happening all over the country. While it took the deaths and wounding of so many LEOs to spur this outpouring of support, I take it at face value and see signs that the public is waking up to the realities that cops face every day.

Take a look—you can find countless stories about how communities are stepping up, creating spontaneous memorials, posting notes of support and gratitude on patrol cars, leaving food, flowers, letters, offers of free hugs, and donations of money at their local police stations. Share the good news with your kids; post stories on social media. Start something yourself. The point is to stay positive *and* realistic. Here are a few examples.

- In Park Forest, Illinois, where an officer was shot and critically wounded, residents tied blue ribbons to trees and installed blue lightbulbs on their porches to show support for the police.
- In Connecticut, children at a local camp drew pictures, sent cards, and delivered a large poster to the police station thanking officers for their service.
- In Rutherford, New Jersey, a married couple donated money to pay for ballistics helmets. The couple said the recent shootings of LEOs motivated them to help protect local officers.
- Residents in Beaumont, Texas, donated 170 body armor kits to their local police department after the Baton Rouge shootings.
- In a recent poll by NBC News and the *Wall Street Journal,* 51% of Americans surveyed said they have a "great deal" or "quite a bit" of confidence in law enforcement—up from 39% a year ago. Police were topped only by the military in public esteem, and their approval has improved "among all demographic groups, including African Americans, Hispanics, and young people."
- In a Gallup poll conducted in October 2016, four out of five white Americans (80%) said they have a "great deal" of respect for the police in their area, up 11 percentage points from 2015. Two out of three nonwhite Americans (67%) said the same, an increase of 14 points.

5. Get the facts.

There is nothing like a crisis to force people to retreat into polarized groups looking for safety with like-minded people. What's happening in our society is complex. All the more reason to think clearly and listen hard to all

points of view. I like these words from former president George W. Bush's address at the memorial service for the five murdered Dallas officers.

> At times it feels like the forces pulling us apart are stronger than the forces binding us together. Too often we judge other groups by their worst examples, while judging ourselves by our best intentions. And this has strained our bonds of understanding and common purpose. (*U.S. News & World Report,* July 12, 2016)

Police officers frequently suffer from what psychologists call the "fallacy of uniqueness," meaning they think the only people who will understand them are other cops. It is true to a large extent that if you've never been a cop, your understanding of what a cop goes through is limited. This is why peer support is so important—because cops are most open to talking to someone who has walked in their shoes. On the other hand, police work is not brain surgery or intergalactic physics. You, as a family member, if given the chance, can understand a great deal. So can my colleagues and I. Much of the time, our understanding, though not perfect, is good enough. But remember that information is different from personal opinions. Exchanges of opinion, especially on social media (see page 14), are often little more than a shouting match. Beware of information based on nothing more than one person's or one group's bird's-eye view. Seek the broadest, not the most narrow, perspective.

The Facts about Officer Safety and Police Shootings

Officer Safety

Getting the facts is just what I did when I went looking for information about officer safety and police shootings. The news for 2016 was not good. According to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund (NLEOMF), law enforcement fatalities nationwide rose to their highest level in five years with 140 officers killed in the line of duty. Firearms-related incidents were the number-one cause of death, an increase of 59 percent over 2015. Of 64 shooting deaths, 21 were the result of ambush-style attacks—the highest total in more than two decades.

Still there is reason to hope that 2016 (like 2001, when 76 LEOs were

killed at Ground Zero), is a one-off year, not a harbinger of things to come. The NLEOMF says that—remembering the big picture—police work is safer than ever. The widespread use of body armor, semiautomatic weapons, mandatory seat-belt policies, and better training has significantly reduced the number of police officers killed in the line of duty over the last 40 years. In the 1970s, an average of 127 LEOs were killed by gunfire each year. In the 2000s this figure has decreased to 57 per year.

Traffic-related fatalities, once the leading cause of death for officers, have fallen to the lowest levels since the 1950s. I understand that this big-picture business is cold comfort, but the truth is it is safer to be a cop than it is to fish commercially, or be a logger, a pilot, a roofer, a miner, a trucker, or a taxi driver.

I also recognize that these numbers relate to physical safety. What we don't know is how many officers will leave the job due to stress and trauma or how many will continue to work with hidden injuries, both physical and emotional.

Officer-Involved Shootings

Roland G. Fryer, an economics professor at Harvard, said it was the "most surprising result" of his career. He examined 1,000 shootings in 10 major police departments and found that African American men and women are more likely to be touched, handcuffed, pushed to the ground, or pepper-sprayed by police than other races, regardless of how, where, and when the encounter occurred. But his study found no evidence of racial discrimination in officer-involved shootings.

The *Washington Post,* in "A Year of Reckoning," did an extensive examination of police shootings. It's well worth reading. The following are some of the key points in its reporting:

- The great majority of people who died at the hands of the police fit at least one of three categories: they were wielding weapons, they were suicidal or mentally troubled, or they ran when officers told them to halt. One in four of those shot were mentally ill or experiencing an emotional crisis. Nine in 10 of the mentally ill killed were armed, "usually with guns but also with knives or other sharp objects."
- In three-fourths of the shootings, "police were under attack or defend-

ing someone who was." Of the suspects killed, 28% were "shooting at officers or someone else," 16% were "attacking with other weapons or physical force, and 31% were pointing a gun." More than one-quarter of the shootings involved suspects fleeing on foot or in a vehicle.

- More than half of those killed had guns "in their possession." Sixteen percent had knives, and 5% attempted to hit officers with their vehicles. Three percent had toy weapons, typically replicas "indistinguishable from the real thing."
- Nine percent of people shot and killed by police were unarmed. "Unarmed black men were seven times as likely as unarmed whites to die from police gunfire."
- More than half of the fatalities involved police agencies that "had not provided officers with state-of-the-art training to de-escalate such encounters."
- Nearly one in three shootings resulted from a car chase that began with a traffic stop for a minor infraction.
- Although more officers were indicted in shooting cases in 2016 than in previous years, the outcome of such cases improved for officers. Five of the seven cases tried ended with the officer acquitted or with a mistrial. In two cases, charges were dismissed. Only 11 of the 65 officers charged in fatal shootings over the past decade were convicted.
- "The widespread availability of video of police shootings . . . has been a primary factor in the rising number of indictments of officers." Six percent of the fatalities were captured by body cameras. In more than half the shooting cases in which LEOs were indicted criminally in 2015, "prosecutors cited video evidence against officers" from police or civilian cameras—twice as often as in the previous decade.

What are we to make of these facts? Here's my interpretation. You may or may not agree.

- Law enforcement needs widespread, systematic, and accurate reporting on police–community interactions, especially those that involve force.

- There is a critical need for more officers to receive more and better training on dealing with the mentally ill.
- Law enforcement needs to question whether productivity statistics are driving officers to take unnecessary action.

6. Use caution with social media and blogs.

There is danger in the digital world, never-ending noise demanding to know if you are with us or against us, as if there is no middle way and a person can belong only in one camp. Add to that hackers and false news presented as objective fact. If you just can't stay away—I know it's hard—at least limit or schedule the amount of time you and your family spend online. Monitor what your children do on the Internet and help them think critically about what they read (see page 16). Antipolice blogs and posts can be violent and threatening. It's exceptionally disturbing to read that one's own parent is an object of hatred and fear.

It's not just the quality of what happens on social media. It's the quantity. Many studies show that being overexposed to scenes of violence has a negative effect on psychological well-being. Too much time on social media puts a heavy cognitive load on adults and children. Insist on device-free dinners. Check with Common Sense Media (*commonsensemedia.org*) for suggestions about limiting your children's screen time.

Do everything you can to be safe. Set your Facebook accounts to the most private settings possible by clicking on the padlock symbol at the top right of the page. Make sure you have a strong password for each account. Be cautious about posting information or photos that let people know where you are, where you live, or where your kids go to school. Don't post vacation pictures until after you return. Refrain from checking in at restaurants and airports. Turn off the GPS feature on your camera or cell phone, especially when taking pictures at home.

7. Stay calm: Pay attention to your body.

It's especially important when things are tough to pay attention to your body. Your brain will lie—tell you you're not upset, not angry—but your body won't. If you feel yourself tensing up or notice that your breathing is shallow and rapid, put down the newspaper, turn off the TV, unplug from

your computer, or end the difficult conversation. It is hard to think clearly and make wise, healthy decisions for yourself or your family when you are in a state of tension. There are several ways to calm down. Here are three proven methods:

- Social support: Social support is extremely helpful. Social isolation is very damaging. Call a trusted friend; talk things over.
- Exercise: Go for a walk. Your body knows how to handle stress through exercise. Give it a chance to help you out by being active. Getting out in nature has been shown to alleviate depression. Ninety minutes of exercise doubles the level of serotonin—the feel-good neurochemical—in your brain. If all you have is 30 minutes, do it anyway. When it comes to exercise, something is better than nothing. As a physical therapist friend says, "Motion is lotion."
- Focus on your breath: One of the quickest, easiest, and most convenient ways to calm yourself is through controlled breathing, sometimes known as belly breathing. Belly breathing resets your autonomic nervous system and is proven to reduce stress and anxiety. Belisa Vranich, a psychologist and author of the book *Breathe,* calls belly breathing "meditation for people who can't meditate." There are several breathing techniques; here's one of the most basic:
    - Sitting or lying down, place your hands on your belly. Breathe in for a count of five, expanding your belly. Pause, then breathe out for a count of six. Try doing this every day for 10 or more minutes. If you have to belly-breathe on the sly, forget the hands. Just mentally focus on your belly and your breath. It still works and no one will notice.

8. Stay connected and be prepared.

Retired LEO and FRSN peer support coordinator Nick Turkovich warns against isolating. Talk to your families and friends about how bad news makes you feel. But remember, people who are intimately involved in law enforcement see things differently from the general public. Some of your friends and family might not understand about deadly force or other police procedures. Expect people to ask dumb questions. Try not to overreact when they come. Most people who ask dumb questions are uninformed,

not malicious. On the other hand, it's perfectly okay to end a conversation you don't want to have. The trick is to do it without starting a fight. If you are not sure how to do that, go to your local library and check out some books on assertiveness, communication skills, and the like.

Some cops do bad things. They represent a tiny fraction of the nearly 900,000 American LEOs. Unfortunately, they cast shame over the whole profession, making every officer's job harder. While people will and do jump to conclusions before the facts are in, it's not your responsibility to defend, explain, or apologize for anyone's behavior just because he or she is a cop. Do not let anyone assume that, as a law enforcement family, you don't understand the broader issues that trouble our country or that you have written anyone off.

Seek out other law enforcement families for support, but try to put a cap on the shop talk that inevitably comes up. Don't neglect hobbies. Do something different, learn something new. Be realistic, but stay positive. In troubled times, this is your biggest challenge.

9. Take a break. Hold things lightly.

Police spouse Gina Bamberger offered this advice after the assassinations in Dallas and Baton Rouge. I don't think I could say it better.

> In the wake of the sadness and heartache of these last few weeks, I want to remind my pals to look to the simple things in life to find peace. Watching a toddler wobble around like a drunken sailor, making eye contact and sharing a smile with someone, enjoying that breeze that caresses the back of your neck just when you need a little relief from the heat. Hugging a friend who loves you for exactly who you are, and watching a garden grow!

Have fun. Even when times are tough. It is not disloyal. If you need professional help, find a culturally competent therapist or chaplain—that is, one who knows what cops do and why.

10. Help your children through troubled times.

When things are bad and LEOs are the targets of negative public opinion or worse, kids need help to put things in perspective. Police psychologists Dr. Katherine McMann and Dr. Sara Garrido suggest helping your kids

distinguish between possibility and probability. While it's possible that Mom or Dad could get hurt on the job, it's not likely to happen. Remind them that almost a million cops go to work and come home safely every day. Show them your protective gear. Tell them about the training LEOs go through. If you haven't already done so, take them to the police station, let them sit in a patrol car, introduce them to the 911 dispatchers who are every cop's lifeline.

Young children are most concerned with issues of separation and safety. Older kids, especially adolescents, are sensitive to being in the spotlight. Help them know what to say in response to taunts they might get at school. Identify adults they can turn to at school or when you're not around.

Keep to a normal routine. Encourage talking (or writing or drawing) about their fears and problem-solve as a family. Make sure your children's understanding of events is accurate. Be honest and give them only as much age-appropriate information as they can tolerate without becoming frightened. Listen carefully. Don't try to address your child's concerns before you understand them. Accept that you won't have all the answers. It is often enough to offer reassurance that, under the circumstances, their feelings of anger, sadness, and fear are normal.

During troubled times, police psychologist Dr. Marla Friedman recommends increasing family time as well as one-on-one time with the law enforcement parent. She advocates using video communication technology like FaceTime or Skype during work so that your children see that you are safe even when they can't be with you in person.

Finally, try to stay on an even keel. Your children are likely to imitate the way you are coping and will react more to your emotional state than to whatever's happening in the world around them.

There's more about supporting the children of LEOs in Chapter 10.

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