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## **First Responder Resilience and Operational Stress:**

*“Risk factors, potential outcomes and why resilience matters in tumultuous times”*

# **Joseph Collins, Public Safety Liaison**

(Chief of Police, ret., Master Resilience Instructor)

# **Bill Mazur, Public Safety Liaison**

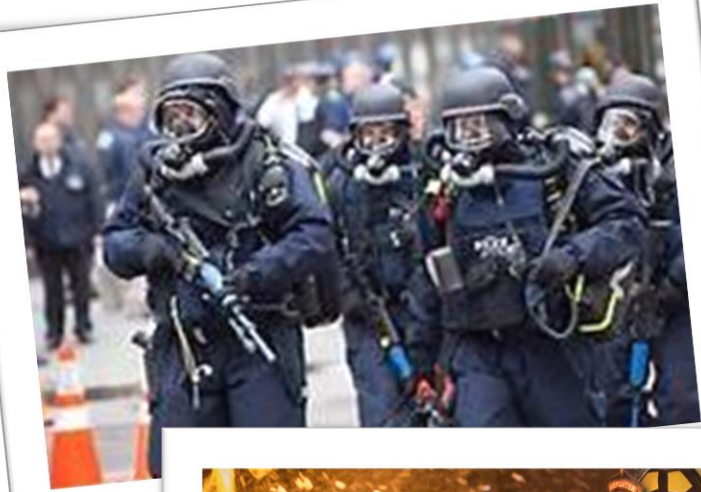
(Deputy Chief, ret., Master Resilience Instructor)

# Our discussion will include:

- 1) Enhanced risk factors that can impact the mental well being of first responders during major crisis.
- 2) Why resilience matters in crisis.
- 3) Possible outcomes/critical considerations for first responders and behavioral health professionals post-COVID-19 & tumultuous times.

# First, let's establish a baseline...

## Sympathetic



## Parasympathetic



# Some relevant questions...

- Are substance use and co-occurring mental health issues a real concern for first responders?
- How prevalent is it?

# Some Stats...

According to the [US Bureau of Justice Statistics](#):

- There are approximately 800,000 Police Officers in the United States.
- Statistics show that 20% to 25% of working police officers are chemically dependent on either alcohol or drugs. (Police – The Law Enforcement Magazine)
- Statistically, that translates to 200,000 Police Officers battling addiction.

# Additional Stats...

- 400,000 career Firefighters and an additional 750,000 Volunteers (according to the NFPA)
- 250,000 full time EMTs and Paramedics and an additional 600,000 volunteers (according to the CDC)

# Conclusion...

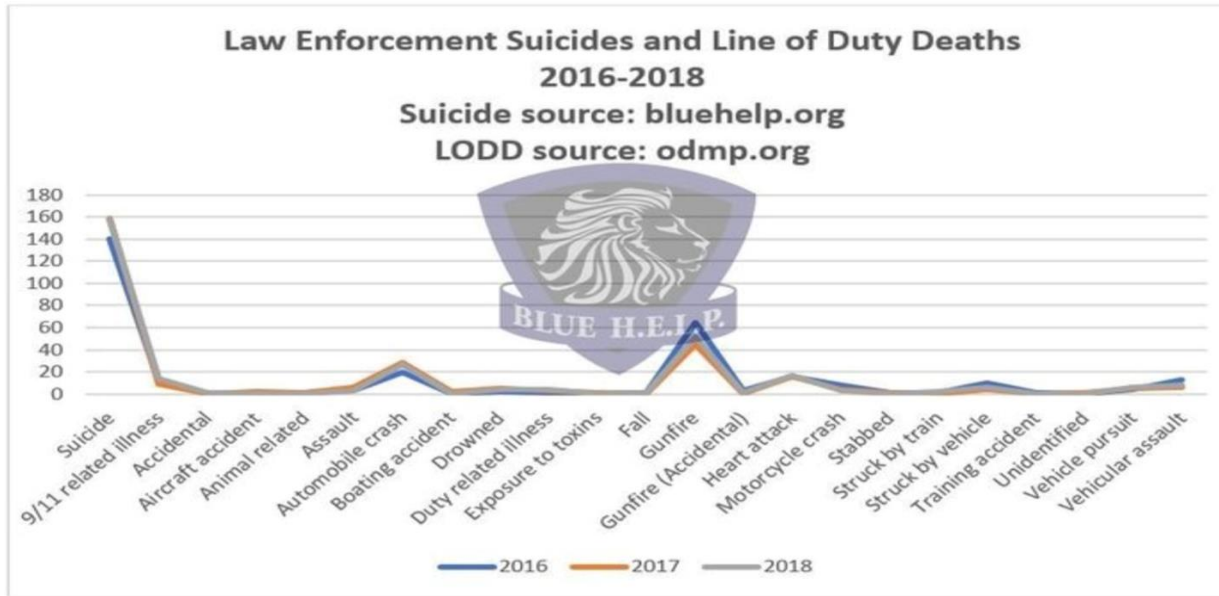
***“ The stigma that comes with mental health treatment holds them back from seeking help even though the resources are available”.***



# Officer Suicide...



# Officer Suicides Surpass LODD's



2022: 8 (1/18/22)

2021: 151

2020: 177

2019: 239

2018: 184

# Risk in Public Safety ...

- Public safety is a difficult profession that can lead to mental health struggles.
- There are inherent risks law enforcement officers and first responders face from repeated exposure to emotional trauma and high-stress incidents. (3.5/6mos.)
- The repercussions of leaving those struggles untreated are significant.



# Risk Factors According to SAMSHA...

(Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)

*“Examples include... exposure (direct or indirect) to death, grief, injury, pain, or loss as well as direct exposure to threats to personal safety, long hours of work, frequent shifts and longer shift hours, poor sleep, physical hardships, and other negative experiences “*

(Botha, Gwin, & Purpora, 2015; Heavey et al., 2015; Marmar et al., 2006; Patterson et al., 2012; Quevillon, Gray, Erickson, Gonzalez, & Jacobs, 2016).

## **Any of this sound familiar?**

# What are the additional risk factors for first responders during COVID-19 & civil unrest?

- Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity (**VUCA**)
- Acute operational stress (Unseen enemy)
- Task saturation: (Information overload or “drinking from a firehose”)
- Fear of the unknown (Anticipatory grief)
- Repeated exposures to trauma and death
- Increased isolation/quarantine
- Public perception and civil liberty (Thankless job/Occupying force)
- Fear of infecting family/loved ones
- Paranoia and fear of being a target (Disguised as situational awareness)

***...negative outcomes are bound to be enhanced significantly if not addressed.***

In an unofficial, bi-partisan poll...

99.9% of Americans agree!!!

If 2020 & 2021 were a Scented Candle it would be;



# Stats on Mental Health...

A recent survey [published by the University of Phoenix](#) found:

- 85 % of first responders have experienced issues related to their mental health (through cumulative and vicarious trauma)
- 55 % of first responders believe their supervisor will treat them differently if they mention their mental health concerns
- 69 % said mental health services are seldom or never utilized

\* 1 in 5 families will experience a mental health crisis\*



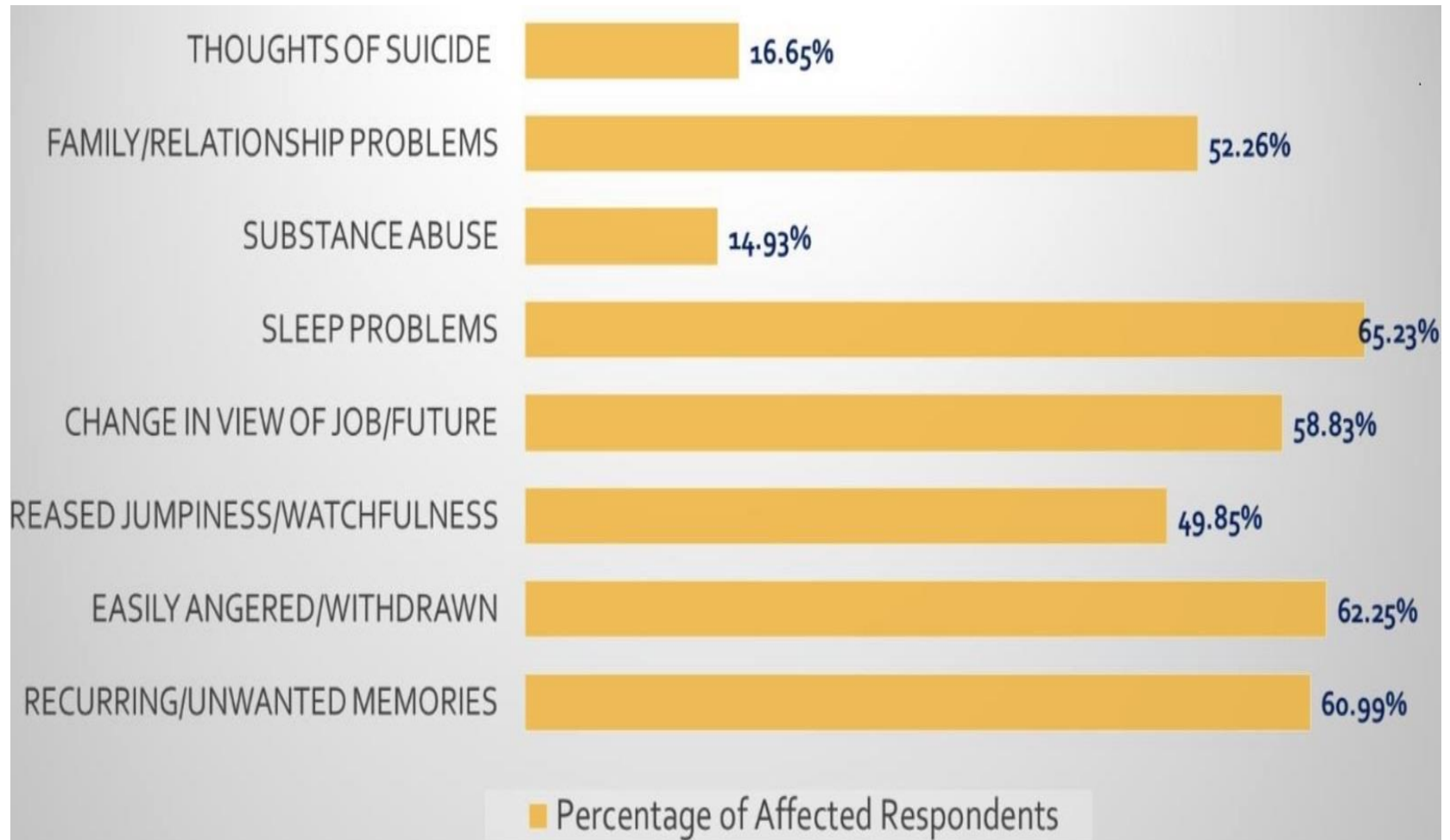
# FOP – Report

## + KEY FINDINGS

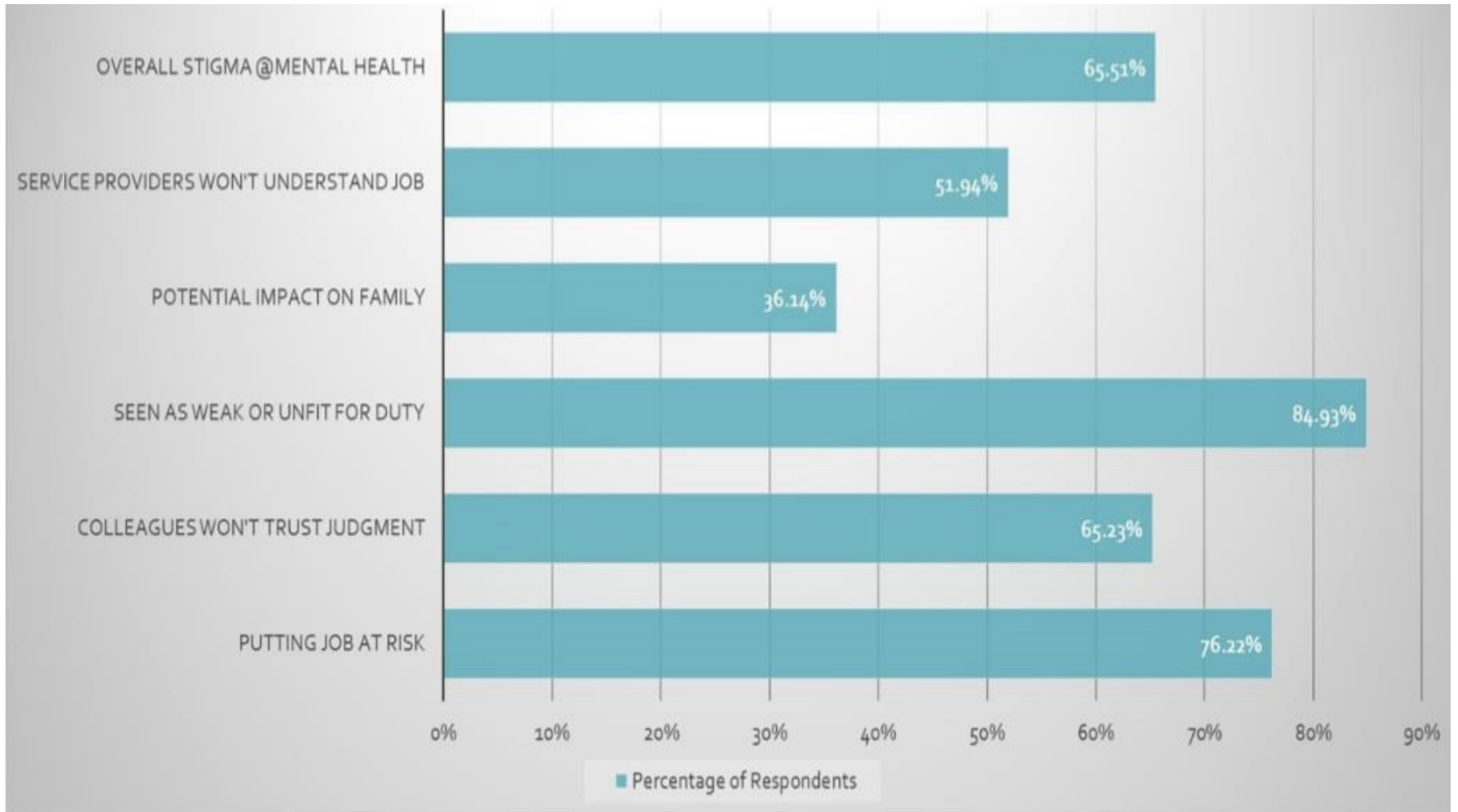
- \*90% report stigma as a barrier to seeking treatment
- \*79% report experiencing critical stress at some point during their career
- \*Over 90% report a belief that there is a lack of awareness by the public and the profession that critical stress is a problem in law enforcement
- \*Peer support is viewed as the most helpful of treatments by 73% of respondents



# Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) - Report



# FOP - Report



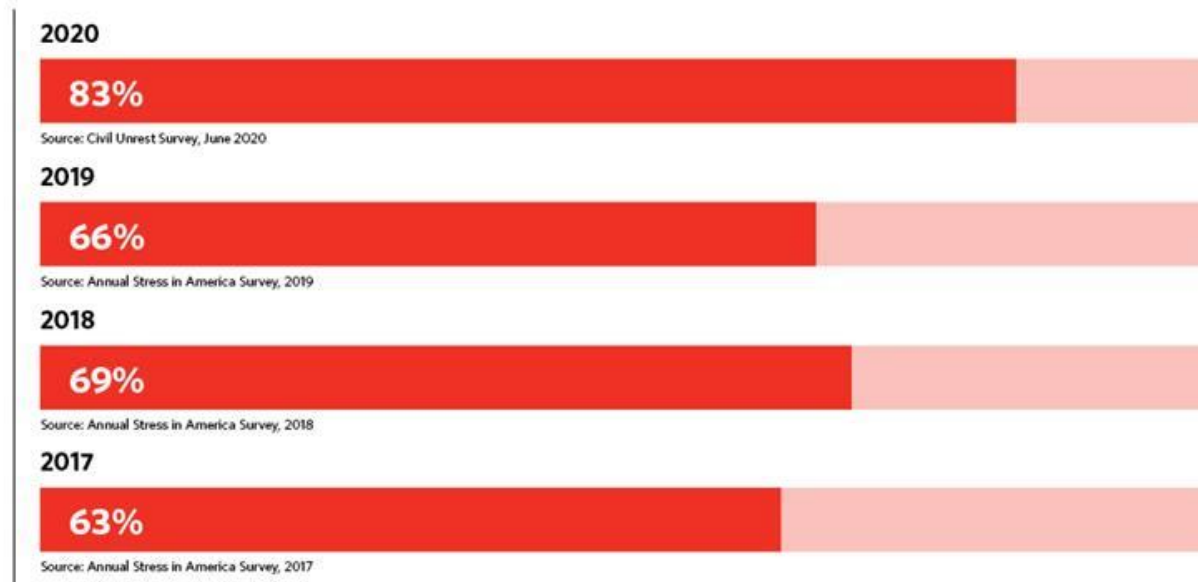
# State of the Union...

STRESS IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

## The future of our nation is a significant source of stress



% reporting that the future of our nation is a significant source of stress



STRESS IN AMERICA™

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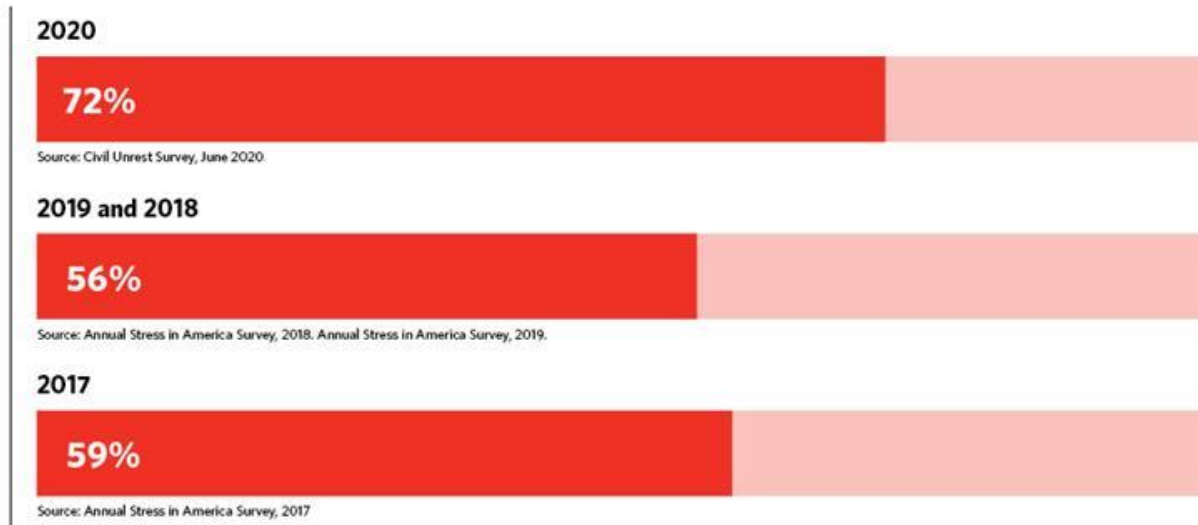
# Stress on Americans...

STRESS IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

## Most Americans say this is the lowest point in history that they can remember



% reporting that this is the lowest point in the nation's history that they can remember



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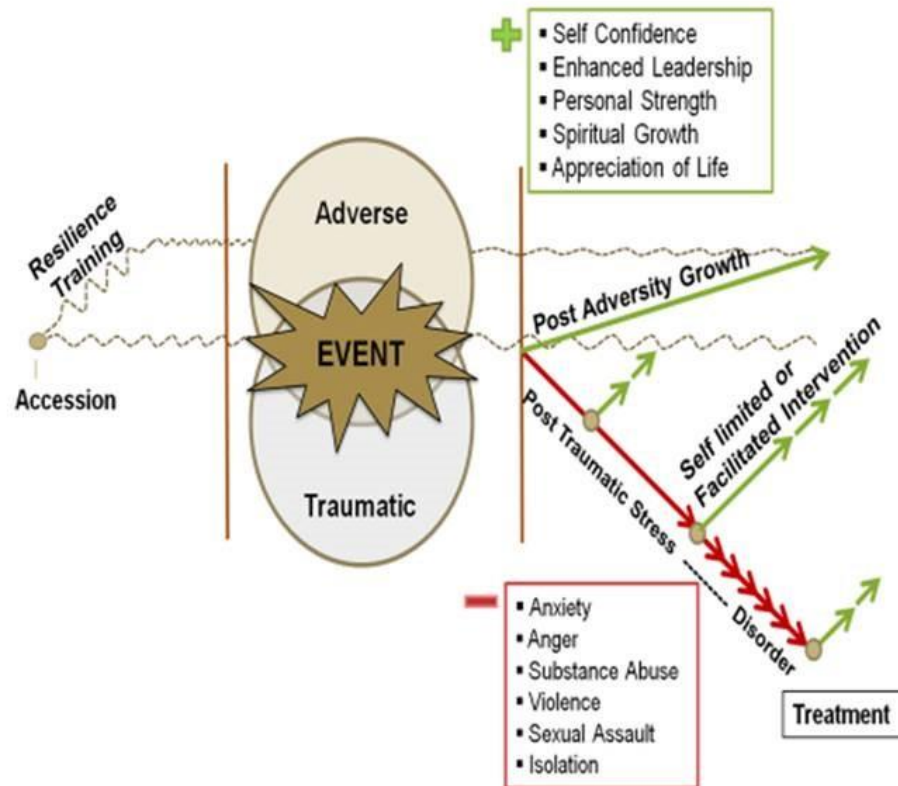
# Why Resilience Matters...

# Why resilience matters...

**Resilience does not make you impervious to trauma...it allows an individual to:**

- Adapt and overcome adversity
- Gain healthy coping mechanisms through **self-awareness** and **self-management**
- “Catch yourself, catching yourself” (Combating the negativity bias)
- Develop an enhanced sense of gratitude
- Learn from adverse experiences
- Resilient people ask ...“What is this trying to teach me” as opposed to “why is this happening to me”?

# Resilience as Risk Mitigation...



RENEWED APPRECIATION OF LIFE

RECOGNITION OF NEW  
POSSIBILITIES

UNDERSTANDING OF ENHANCED  
PERSONAL STRENGTH

IMPROVED RELATIONSHIPS WITH  
OTHERS

GREATER SENSE OF MEANING

No new learning

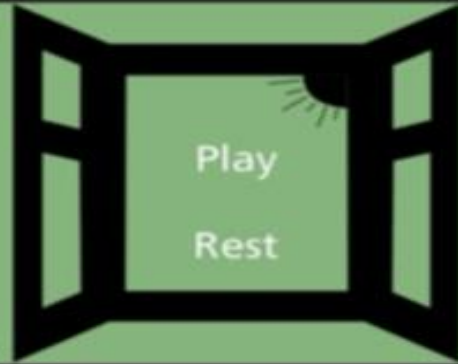
# Hyperarousal

Sympathetic Nervous System (Mobilization)

Fight or Flight, Depression, Aggression, Increased heart rate,  
Perception of Danger, Emotional Reactivity,  
Poor Judgement, Excess energy



Dysregulation, Hard to Calm Down



Parasympathetic Nervous System- Ventral Vagal  
(Social Engagement and Connection)

# Window of Tolerance

Communication, Time and Space Awareness, Safety detected,  
Greater access to pre-frontal cortex, Full emotional range  
Ability to learn new information happens here

Dysregulation, Shutting Down

No new learning

# Hypoarousal

Parasympathetic Nervous System- Dorsal Vagal (Immobilization)

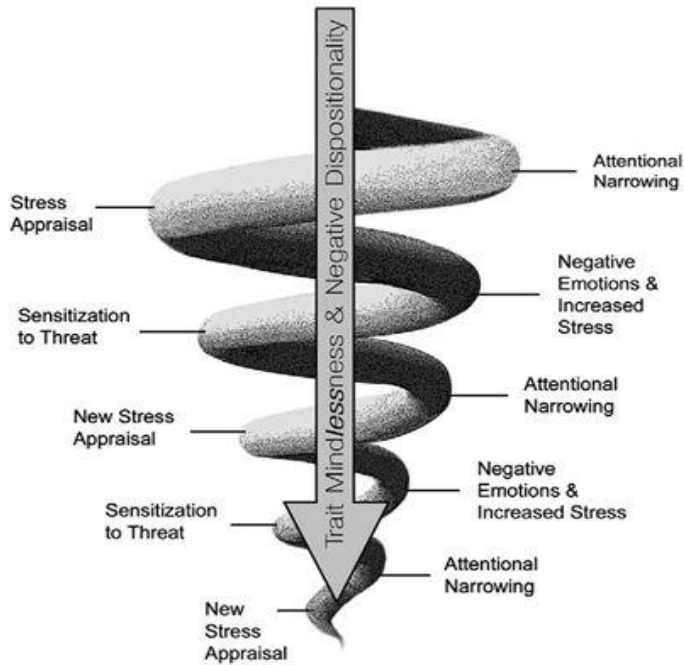
Dissociation, Decreased heart rate, Isolation/Withdrawal, Sleeping,  
Numbness, Lack of energy, Flat Affect



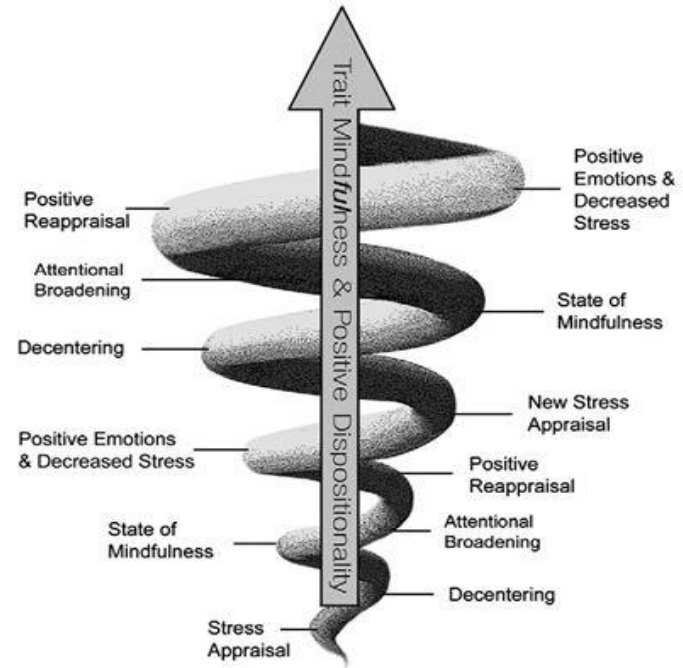


# Fredrickson's Broaden and Build Model

- positive affect builds resilience and buffers over stress (see Garland et al., 2010)



Downward spiral of psychopathology



Upward spiral of flourishing

# Foundation of Resilience

## The **PERMA** Model of Well-Being

### *Positive Emotion*

Positive emotions are an essential part of our well-being. Happy people look back on the past with gladness; look into the future with hope; and they enjoy and cherish the present.

### *Relationships*

Everyone needs someone. We enhance our well-being and share it with others by building strong relationships with the people around us - family, friends, coworkers, neighbours.

### *Accomplishment*

Everyone needs to win sometimes. To achieve well-being and happiness, we must be able to look back on our lives with a sense of accomplishment: 'I did it, and I did it well'.

### *Engagement*

When we focus on doing the things we truly enjoy and care about, we can begin to engage completely with the present moment and enter the state of being known as 'flow'.

### *Meaning*

We are at our best when we dedicate time to something greater than ourselves. This might be religious faith, community work, family, politics, a charity, a professional or creative goal.

From Martin Seligman's *Flourish*, 2011

# Protective Factors

## (Techniques to combat Op-stress)

- Self-care (as a discipline not an indulgence; sleep, exercise & nutrition to balance out cortisol levels, Vitamin D/sunlight)
- Mindfulness and meditation
- Breathing exercises ( 3-5 minute YouTube guided blocks, box breathing, tactical breathing)
- Drawing boundaries with the 24-hr. news cycle
- Taking one day at a time
- Controlling what you can control (circle of influence)
- Develop a new routine (30-day challenge)
- Keep a clean and uncluttered living and workspace

# Techniques continued...

- Seek out positivity in relationships and activities, motivational videos
- Physical distancing v. social distancing (video conference)
- Learn a new skill if possible (Youtube, masterclass, audible)
- Engage in passion outside of work
- Be mindful and intentional about work-life balance
- A-B-C + D-E or SLLS (stop, look, listen, smell) before you have an emotional reaction
- Journal, or take mental notes on what this could potentially teach you
- R.A.K. : Random Act of Kindness
- Re-connect with an old acquaintance

**Where do we go from here?**

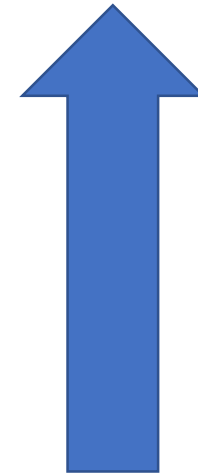
# Critical considerations for those on the front lines...

- Acute operational stress (Unseen enemy)
- Task saturation: (Information overload or “drinking from a firehose”)
- Fear of the unknown (anticipatory grief)
- Repeated exposures to trauma and death
- Increased isolation/quarantine
- Public perception and civil liberty questions (LE specific)
- Fear of infecting family/loved ones



# Possible Outcomes...

- Enhanced emotional detachment
- Distrust
- Cynicism
- Resentment
- Anger
- Anxiety
- Depression
- PTS(I)



# Reality Check...

Behavioral Health professionals have now become the next wave of “front line” responders.

## **Risk Factors:**

- Exposure to trauma not typically seen by clients
- Compassion fatigue
- Burnout



# Now for some good news...

- Teletherapy will play a more pronounced role with LEO/FR clients
- Teletherapy has opened opportunities for the first responder community that we did not see (pre-COVID)
- You can impact a demographic in desperate need
- Influence outcomes for those in crisis in a big way... (families, careers and lives)

# Organizational Wellness Check



- + Do you have an EAP?
- + Do you have **peer support** resources?
- + Do your employees have an external, confidential source to go to for assistance ?
- + Are your supervisors trained to recognize signs of chronic stress or an adverse reaction to an event?
- + What does your insurance benefit cover in terms of substance use disorders and/or mental health issues?

# Organizational Wellness Check



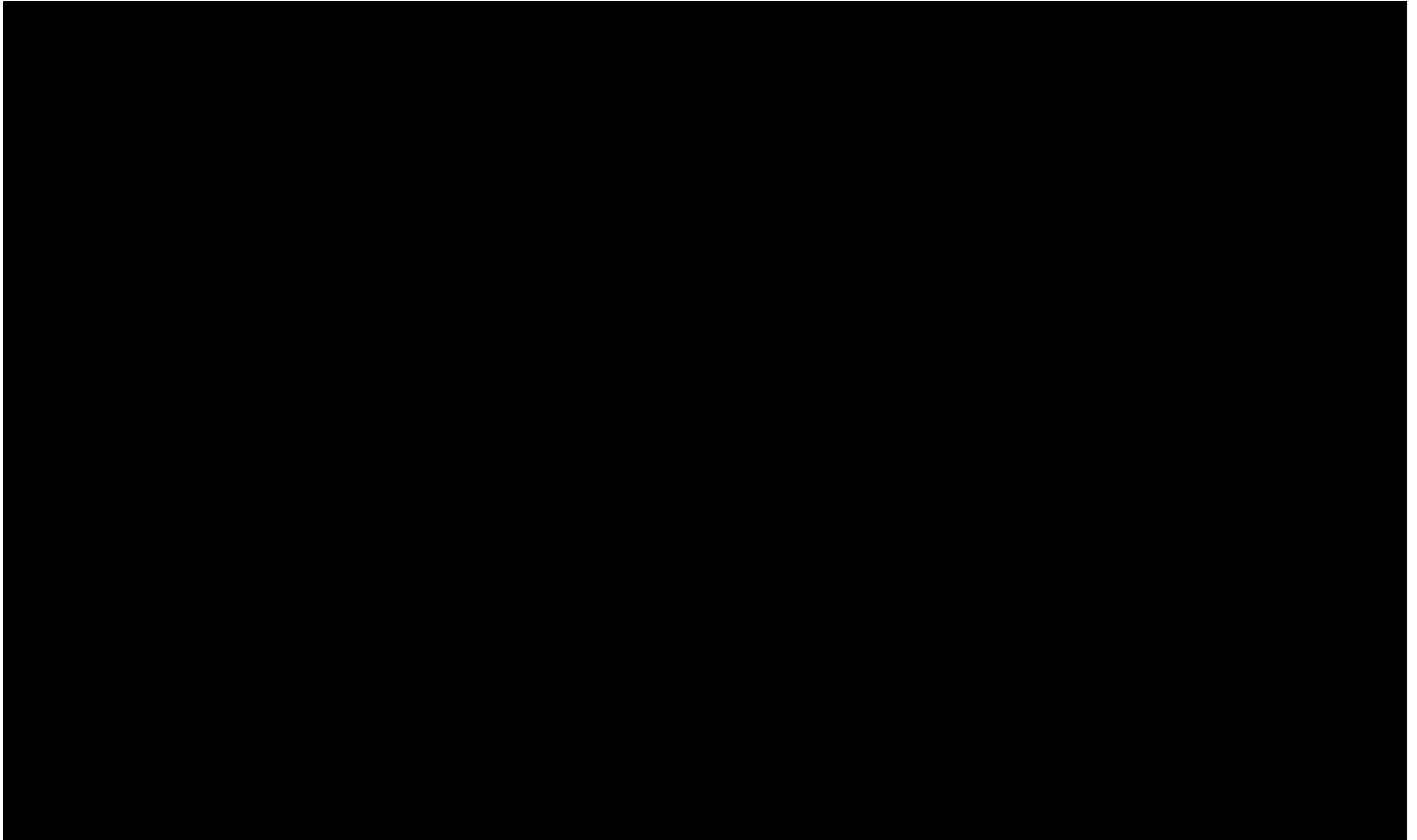
- + Are you self-insured (you may have more leverage securing treatment for a member than you realize)?
- + What are the out-of-pocket costs, if any, associated with treatment?
- + Do you have resources (preventative measures) available that contribute to the physical/mental health of your members? (Think resilience education and a culture that understands and promotes self-care)
- + Do you have a mechanism in place for spousal support?
- + Are you aware of the state regulatory guidelines with respect to first responders and mental health treatment?

# Organizational Wellness Check

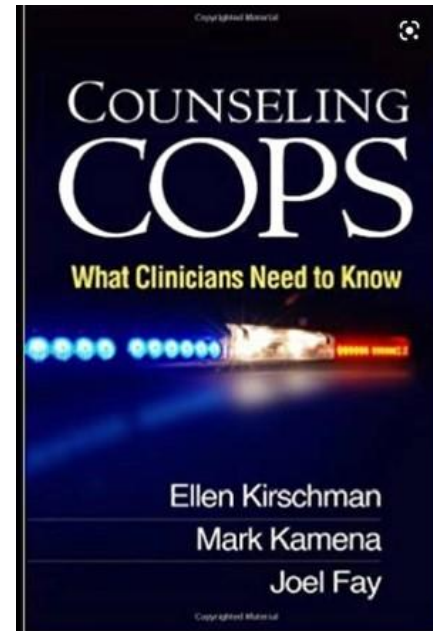
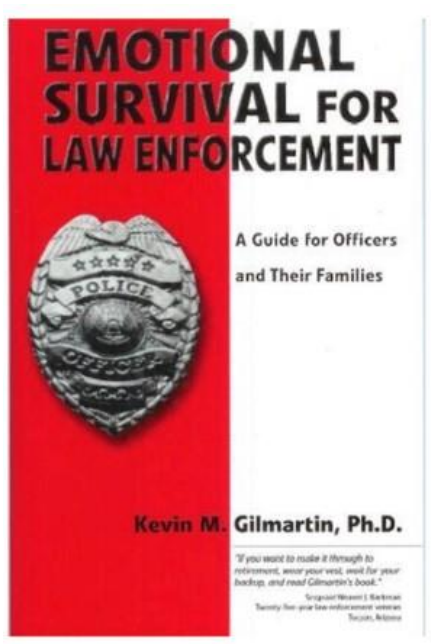


- + Do you have a best practices model in place to assist personnel after a critical incident?
- + Have you located, vetted and spoken with mental health professionals in your area that specialize in treating first responders?
- + Are you disseminating information on a department-wide level that reinforces your support of personnel seeking help and are you doing that consistently? (Conversation + education = reduced stigma)
- + Do you have a chaplaincy program to assist with employee outreach?
- + Are you making this information available to trainees/recruits in the academy?

# Blake's Story

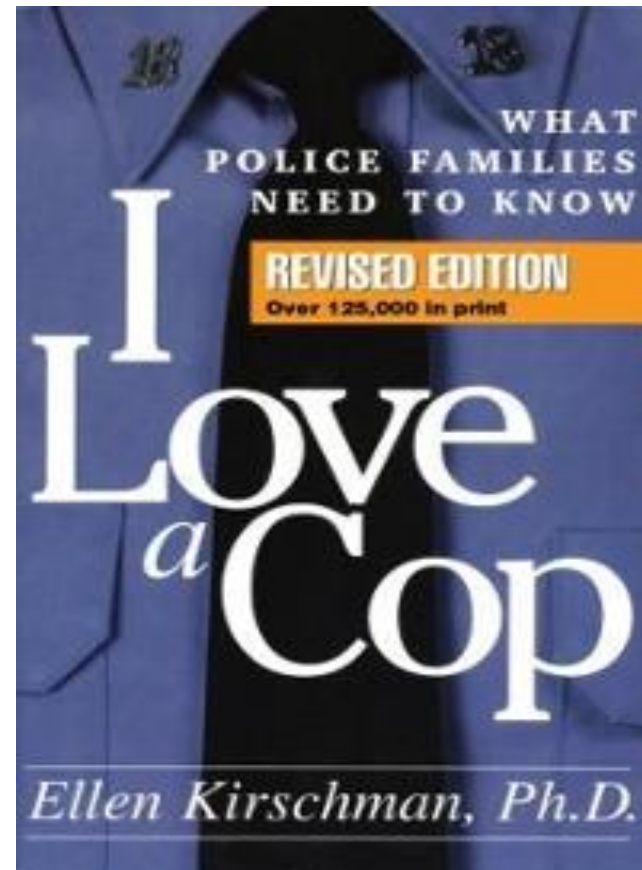
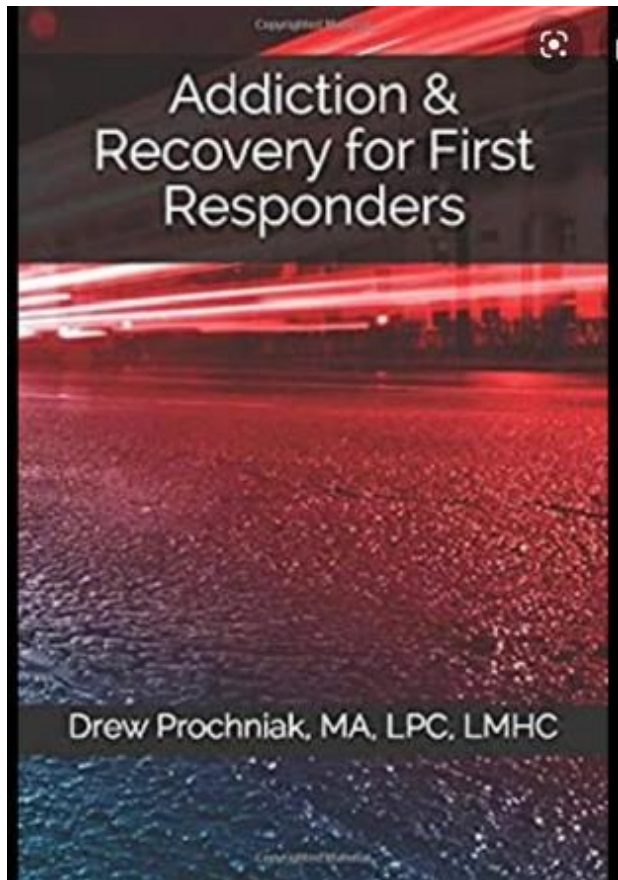


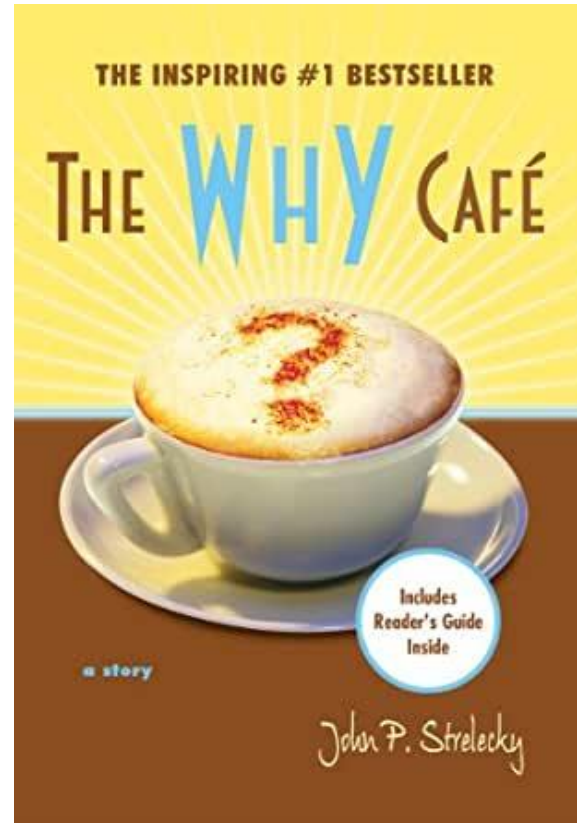
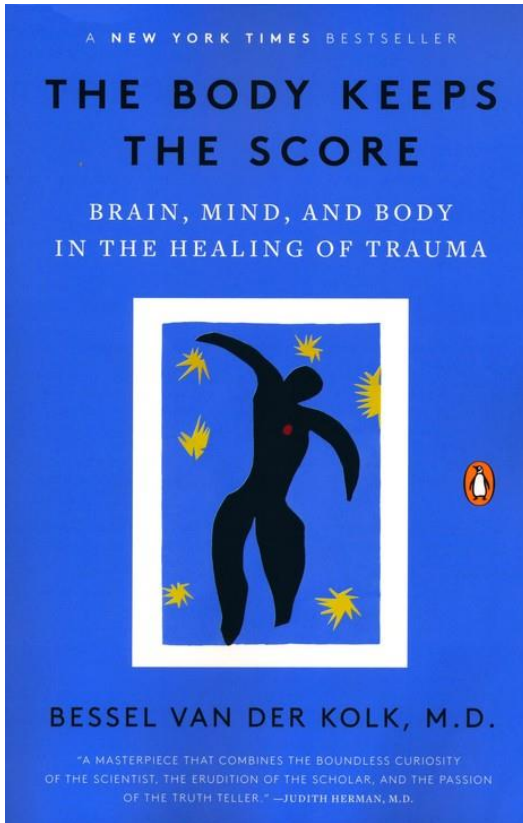
# Resources...



## Resilient Minds on the Front Lines

[www.resilientminds.US](http://www.resilientminds.US)







# Some Links to Checkout...

## **First Responder Report by SAMSHA:**

<https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/dtac/supplementalresearchbulletin-firstresponders-may2018.pdf>

## **University of Phoenix**

<https://www.phoenix.edu/media-center/press-release/university-of-phoenix-survey-finds-93-percent-of-first-responders-say-mental-health-is-as-important-as-physical-health.html>

## **FOP Report**

<https://files.fop.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/OfficerWellnessSurvey.pdf>



[www.helping1stresponders.com](http://www.helping1stresponders.com)

[Joe.Collins@acadiahealthcare.com](mailto:Joe.Collins@acadiahealthcare.com)

920.973.7310

[William.Mazur@acadiahealthcare.com](mailto:William.Mazur@acadiahealthcare.com)

609.515.4111

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