

Chippies and Shrinks on the Peer Support Team
By Anne Bisek, Psy.D. and Andy O'Hara, California Highway Patrol (Ret.)

What do highway patrol officers and psychologists have in common on the Peer Support team? Retired California Highway Patrol officer Andy O'Hara and psychologist Anne Bisek from Fremont pondered this point together in hopes of bringing both professionals on a Peer Support team closer together.

Investigations and psychotherapy do have a lot in common. That is why one therapy visit (or one visit to the scene isn't enough). Highway patrolmen have solid leads, psychologists have clinical hypotheses. These are fancy terms for relying on "gut instinct" sometimes.

In a major investigation or during therapy, you have to trace things backward. A CHP officer might trace things back by finding impending skid marks that indicate the moment just when a driver was putting on the brakes; similarly, a psychologist might trace things back to find the time before the client had children, lost their job, or was still spending happy time with their spouse.

Both professions collect various types of evidence. While investigating an accident, police or professional photographs can be very useful. Pictures are admissible and can allow you, for example, to pick out more skid marks than what you saw initially on the scene. With a quality photograph, a CHP officer has the time, without traffic swirling around, to relax and scrutinize details in a scene that may have been overlooked.

Similarly, a psychologist may use a paper and pencil test to collect evidence of depression, anxiety or critical incident stress. A paper inventory of symptoms that a client fills out with a pencil can be helpful for the psychologist to look at later. Perhaps symptoms of difficulty breathing, concentrating or sleeping weren't discussed during the session, but the results of the symptom checklist might show items that will be helpful to both the client and the psychologist later.

Collecting physical evidence is important to both professionals. In the case of a hit and run crash, glass, paint transfers, personal items and other objects that can be matched to an unknown vehicle are important to the highway patrol officer. The CHP officer wants to identify the correct car not only based on witness statements but also with corroborating physical evidence. One dark colored car can look a lot like another dark colored car of the same make and model without some good physical evidence to show the differences.

In the case of a client who has symptoms such as low energy, increased need for sleep and weight gain, a referral to a medical doctor is important to the psychologist. The psychologist wants to find the correct diagnosis, not only based on psychological symptoms but also with physical evidence such as a check to see if the thyroid is functioning properly. A thyroid problem can look a lot like depression without some good physical evidence.

Although most crashes need to be investigated, not all result in felony charges. Rarely are collisions intentional and, while responsibility is attached, it is rarely "criminal." Most, in fact, are truly accidental. In a more pure sense, psychotherapy is not about faultfinding or blame. Sometimes people are simply struggling.

Both professions sometimes involve a short-term intense relationship at a pivotal point in another's life. Sometimes a CHP officer must sort out a chaotic scene as best she or he can and get traffic moving again. Similarly, a psychologist doesn't want a client to stay in therapy forever. Just as a CHP officer may not know the final outcome after the victims are loaded into the ambulance, a psychologist might not know the end result if a client chooses not to return to therapy.

Do highway patrol officers and psychologists have a lot in common when it comes to Peer Support? Absolutely. Both professions have to take care of themselves first before assisting others. Both are at risk for compassion fatigue – literally becoming exhausted from caring so much. Both professionals are vulnerable to performance guilt. This can be caused by mistakenly thinking that one did not do enough, when in fact there were many more factors involved in the situation. Both jobs can involve tragedy and triumph, hope and resilience in the face of great adversity. Finally, it is highly unlikely that neither a psychologist nor a California Highway Patrol officer ever has the same day twice.