

A 7-year veteran of the department had been having marriage difficulties after his wife had a miscarriage. She lost her job in high tech and was considering spending some time at her elderly mother's house because they were worried about her mother falling. Jim responded to two baby not breathing calls this past week and called Pedro, a member of the peer support team. They spoke each night for three days.

On the fourth day, Jim admitted that he has been so drunk the previous night that he passed out in his garage. The next day he sobered up and told his wife to go to her mother's house, saying she would be happier there. When Pedro called Jim at home, it was clear additional support was needed, and Pedro suggested a mental health professional.

Jim asked, "What, do you think I'm crazy? Weak? Like I can't handle the job?"

Pedro reassured him, "I was afraid you'd say that. No, you are not crazy or weak. I think of individual counseling as just another tool in your toolbox. What you need is back up, code 3. You're overwhelmed."

Pedro went on to explain that individual psychotherapy or couple's counseling can be helpful in the short term when life's challenges get to be too much. Psychologists can help sort out negative thinking, spot troublesome patterns, suggest some changes in behavior or communication, or help a first responder cope with critical incident stress symptoms. Weekly 50-minute sessions are typical; the client and the psychologist can set goals together and determine how many sessions are needed.

THESE MYTHS ARE PEER PITFALLS

Pedro made a good referral because he was prepared. He also didn't believe some of the common myths about therapy:

I am a trained Peer supporter. I don't need any back-up. I can do this myself.

Therapy is new age or exotic.

Going to therapy means you are weak or crazy.

One session with a psychologist should cure you.

Therapy is forever.

All psychologists are the ones who take your gun and badge away.

There are no therapists who "get" what first responders do. Only another first responder understands.

In his den at home, Pedro kept the Employee Assistance Program Directory handy for information on how many sessions are allowed, the amount of copay if any, and if a physician referral is needed. Pedro knew a helpful psychologist he would refer a colleague to, and kept a few business cards in his car.

However, Jim still resisted. He said, "I only want to talk to someone who gets it. You understand my situation, and the pressure we are under."

"Jim, if you don't like this psychologist you could ask your medical doctor or primary care physician, a friend, relative, or other peer support team member for a referral to a psychologist who is culturally competent with public safety work— someone who gets the job, and gets us."

Jim replied, "I'm still not sure, what if my Captain finds out?"

Pedro answered, “Man, if a psychologist repeated anything you said without a written release of information they would be in huge trouble. I’m talking about \$10,000 fine type of trouble. Asking a psychologist to provide therapy without confidentiality is like asking a surgeon to perform surgery without anesthesia.”

Psychotherapy is confidential. This means that what is said to a psychologist cannot be shared with anyone unless a release of information (which can be retracted at any time) is signed by the client authorizing the psychologist to do so. The exceptions to confidentiality include harm to self or others (e.g. suicide or homicide). Like public safety personnel, psychologists are mandated reporters for child or elderly abuse. Unlike public safety personnel, psychologists are *not* mandated reporters for domestic violence. Clients have the right to review their file.

Jim sighed. “Pedro, I don’t even know where to start. What would I say to a shrink?”

Pedro answered, “Jim I wondered the same thing. I also thought how would I know how to hire a psychologist? I called around and asked the doctors these questions:
Do you have experience with critical incident stress?
Have you had CISM training?
Have you worked with first responders?
Do you have experience with my situation (divorce, parenting, addiction, chronic pain, or PTSD)?”

PEER SUPPORT SKILL

Knowing when to refer a colleague for therapy is a critically important peer support skill.

Ask yourself:

Are you the one calling your colleague to check up on them instead of your colleague calling you for help? Is your colleague taking active steps to solve the problem? Is your colleague feeling better? Have her/his symptoms improved in the past two weeks, or are things getting worse? Is s/he drinking more, sleeping less than when you began peer support?

Jim responded, “Well it is the middle of the night. I’m not going to call anyone now. I’ll call someone later.”

Pedro answered, “Fine. Would you be willing to check out some helpful online links?”

Jim agreed and Pedro sent him some helpful links. By way of example, the California Psychological Association has a psychologist locator service, which lists licensed psychologists who are members of the association:

<http://www.cpapsych.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=104>

Other states have Psychological Associations which may have a similar service.

Psychology Today website:

http://therapists.psychologytoday.com/rms/prof_search.php

Jim smiled. “You know, my brother is a cop in the Midwest. This might be helpful to him as well. I might email him these links.”

Pedro laughed. “Man, you need to help yourself first before you help others. If you think therapy works for you, you might suggest he check out the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) website under Psychological Services section. He could also call Kim Kohlhepp at (703) 647-7237 or 1 (800)843-4227 ext 237. He may be able to provide contact information for a psychologist who is a member of IACP in his state. It isn’t a recommendation, but a place to start.”

Jim shifted in his chair. “Ok ok. Did you see the game last night?”

Pedro smiled. “I did see the game. When are you going to call the psychologist?”

Jim flipped the business card between his fingers. “I’ll call at 9:00 am.”

Pedro leaned forward, “So if I call you at 10 am...”

“You have my word Pedro. Thanks man.”

The two shook hands, and the referral stuck.

CALL OUT TO COMMAND STAFF

How well do you know your range master? What is her/his background? Do you know the name of the mechanic to whom you send your fire engines when they need a tune up? Why not take that approach to the psychologists on your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) list?

Recruit first responder competent psychologists. Consider asking if they have police/fire/dispatch/highway patrol officers in their family. Look for psychotherapists who have been reserve officers, or volunteered at the fire department. Ask the psychologist if they have ever treated critical incident stress.

Train the psychologists in your area so they can better help the first responders in your department. Invite clinicians on the EAP list to do ride alongs or to meet the peer support team for lunch. Plan a one-day per year training day with peers and psychotherapists.

Dr. Anne Bisek is a licensed clinical psychologist in Fremont, California specializing in first responders and their families. www.Doc911.net. She can be contacted at Anne@Doc911.net. Pedro the Peer Supporter is a fictional character, but the resources are accurate.