

TRAGEDY AND

How one Florida public safety telecommunicator made it back from the “darkest place.”

By Michael Speigle

As public safety telecommunicators we are constantly taking care of other people’s needs and emergencies. We hear and live through the countless traumas of our callers and those cries for help from our units, but rarely do we find out the outcome before moving to the next call. So, what about us? What about our health and our well-being? And how are we dealing with the emotional toll it takes?

In 2017, I lost my best friend and fiancé to suicide. This took me to the darkest places I have been in my lifetime. But this tragedy didn’t just affect me. It affected my entire dispatch center. The 9-1-1 call I placed was mistakenly routed to my emergency communications center even though the incident took place outside our coverage area in the next county. At that time, I was unaware of this. To this day, I can remember exactly what was said to the call taker on the other end of the phone. Needless to say, my trauma was shared on a personal and professional level with each of my colleagues.

I was able to hold myself together fairly well until, unexpectedly, my lieutenant and previous captain arrived, followed by several on duty units and friends from my agency and a neighboring agency. The compassion shown by these amazing people along with countless others at the sheriff’s office was overwhelming.

I am so proud to say I work for the Sarasota County Sheriff’s Office.

These events only paint a small picture. What came next was another challenge. We have all heard at one point or another in our career that we need to check our personal lives and emotions at the door. But how do you check something like this? Something that not only affected me but my entire center. As a supervisor, how can I be responsible for my team members along with answering 9-1-1 calls and dispatching units if I can’t help myself?

Trauma affects each of us differently. Some of the symptoms of psychological trauma include shock, denial, confusion, anger, mood swings, anxiety and guilt.¹ I was diagnosed with PTSD due to my inclination to sleep excessively some days, have insomnia on others along with nightmares, flashbacks and the

previously mentioned trauma symptoms. For a time, I was unable to drive or leave the house. Luckily, I had some amazing friends who stepped up to help. Topping it off, over the course of 25 months since this occurred, I put on a significant amount of weight. It wasn’t until my uniforms and civilian clothes had stretched as far as they would go that I said, “enough was enough.”

I had to start making some healthy changes in my life. I started with good portion control and cardio exercises. Our current captain instituted a step challenge to promote a healthier work environment. This was a fantastic idea and great motivator for me and the entire center. Three months later I had dropped 40 pounds and felt so much better. I am sleeping better, eating better and working out six days a week. Finally, some progress! Even my shift has started to pick up these good habits. I see them doing laps around the dispatch center between calls getting in their steps.

The work you are doing is important and critical when you are in the office. But when you’re not, you must learn to think about yourself. Take 30 minutes each day to take a walk, go for a run, hit the weights or just relax and lay in the sun. Eat a well-balanced

