

I Have A Problem?

The holidays are past. Many of us used them as an excuse to maybe take a drink or two...or possibly one drink too many. While there is never a rational reason to drink to excess, celebrating the holidays is one that seems to be acceptable, especially in law enforcement (LE) circles. Watch parties, unit parties, many have a common theme: alcohol. Observing a colleague or friend who has had too much to drink is never a pleasant experience, but in the context of the season, we have a tendency to overlook the offender and to forgive the act.

However, what about the rest of the year, the days that aren't holidays or some other special occasion? What excuse do we make when we, or someone that we know, indulge to excess? The simple truth is that whether it's alcohol, drugs, sex, tobacco, or food, using any one of them in excess amounts to an addiction. Being addicted to something bears a negative connotation, even if the product is legal (food and tobacco as an example). Having that addiction indicates that an individual has reliance on something, or is compelled to use or partake of a certain substance or practice. The need becomes problematic because it compels the individual to seek out that product or thing to satisfy a craving. When that compulsion becomes strong enough, it leaps to the top of the list of priorities and soon morphs into an obsession. In our world, obsession is never good.

So who bears responsibility for an addiction? Contemporary culture has a tendency to allow wrongdoers to be absolved of any responsibility or accountability. It's popular to make someone a victim; it allows them to place the blame on someone or something else. Childhood, marriage, and education...are all issues that are popular to blame for a lack of conviction and character on the part of the individual. Here's a bold suggestion: why not place the blame on the person that has the addiction? Wouldn't that be the logical thing to do? So let's agree on that point first before we move forward.

In LE the more common addiction is alcohol abuse. It seems ingrained in our occupation—we use it to unwind after our shift and to rub elbows with our colleagues. We contend that it is a vehicle for us to bond with other cops and folks that also work for the department, i.e., civilian employees. If indeed, we did meet with our buddies after work and had one or two beers that would be ideal. We could accomplish the task of unwinding and strengthening bonds. However, we all know that stopping for one or two is a fairy tale for most of us. Before we know it, the night passes quickly into day, the bar announces last call, and we are “over the limit.”

If the aforementioned circumstances are a regular event in your life, you are probably addicted. Admit that you have a problem before it ruins your life, your career, and your family. That's the first step. Next, have a plan to get past your reliance. Depending on how much you drink, how often, and how long you have been drinking, will dictate your course of action. It's a rare person that can get beyond the problem on their own. Most will need help, either in the form of a professional, or something as simple as a local AA group. The key is to recognize the problem and attack it with vigor.

Most departments recognize addiction as a problem that is not unique to LE. It's one that is seen throughout society in a myriad of occupations. If your department is progressive and/or large enough, they will probably have a program in place that addresses alcohol abuse. The confidentiality of the program ensures that no one but you and your contact will be aware that you are seeking help. The biggest impediment that I've seen when officers look for help through their department is when other cops perceive them as weak; they think that asking for help is a pejorative. Truth be known, it takes a strong personality to admit when one needs help. Moreover, what's the alternative? Continue the bad behavior and wait until you are ordered into a program or worst-case scenario—fired?

Many departments have adopted a zero tolerance rule to combat alcohol problems. In May of 2002, the NYPD began a policy that mandates all officers to be fit for duty at all times, even when they are not working. And in 1994 a deadly accident involving an FBI Agent who was driving under the influence of alcohol, led to the present "Bright Line Policy," which holds accountable any employee involved in alcohol related misconduct. These are two large LE agencies that are doing something about a situation that impacts all of us.

The problem of people who are addicted to both legal and illegal substances is one that is not going to disappear anytime soon. Supervisors and administrators must attack it together. Supervisors must identify those in their charge that display signs of addiction; administrators must develop programs that not only address addictive behavior, but also *prevent* it by offering education and programs aimed at alternatives. The worst thing that can happen is to allow the problem to escalate, for it will only get worse before ever getting better. To ignore the problem is to be complicit in the demise of a fellow officer. Identify the problem and work on a solution, for either yourself or your friend. Get help; get healed.

Stay safe brothers and sisters!