

Start Building Your Village NOW

By Cheryl Callahan

Presented at the 2012 Conference on Correction Officer Wellness, Lowell, MA, December 17, 2012. Cheryl Callahan is the widow of Capt. James A. Callahan, Jr., a 27-year veteran of Middlesex Sheriff's Office, MA, who died by suicide, age 53, June 2011. Used with permission.

Life with Jim Callahan (Cal) was complicated by the fact that he kept his feelings and emotions bottled up. Although buried deep within him, they ruled his everyday behavior. He could not communicate his hopes, fears, or anxieties. Some of his troubles came from the job. Some came from home. Everything was exacerbated by continuous exposure to the “bad side of life” ever present at work.

His job was extremely important to him but it came with enormous amounts of pressure—24 hrs a day, 7 days a week. It took Jimmy years to open up to me about how hard it was to spend every working night making sure his coworkers were safe, keeping the peace inside the prison walls, and checking on inmates to make sure they hadn't killed themselves. When surrounded by so much negative energy, it is difficult to believe that good things can happen in life. Jim was hard pressed to “look on the bright side” of anything outside his family.

You Correctional Officers accept a huge amount of personal responsibility. It comes with the job – a very important job. Your personal characteristics include honesty, sound judgment, integrity, and a strong sense of responsibility and commitment. You take care of others. You protect them. You do not want to burden others with knowledge of the evil, sadness and despair you encounter on a daily basis as part of your job. Many of you find it difficult to go home and share your daily activities with your family. Taking a psych patient to the hospital or finding an inmate dead in his cell may be part of your world, but you do not want to make it ours. You know more evil than we “outsiders” encounter in a lifetime and your instinct is to keep it from us. You do not want to pass along the nightmares. You do not want this evil to permeate your home.

I am here to tell you that by bottling this up and protecting your family from all that goes on in your day, you are doing yourself and your family a great disservice. No one, no matter how strong and secure, should be asked to contain your daily stress. You need to recognize that it's ok to talk about it, process it and let it go. Get rid of it! Suppression can kill you. Look what it did to Jim.

Jim grew up with a Dad whom he respected. He loved his father and was proud of him. So proud of him in fact that he followed in his Dad's footsteps by becoming a Correctional Officer. Unfortunately “Jas” Callahan's life ended in 1973 after being assaulted and pushed down a flight of stairs by an inmate. Jas paid for his dedication to the job with his life and in a totally different way so did Jim. It's a sad parallel.

Hillary Clinton once said “... we have learned that to raise a happy, healthy and hopeful child, it takes a family, it takes teachers, it takes clergy, it takes business people, it takes community leaders, it takes those who protect our health and safety, it takes all of us. Yes, it takes a village.”

YOU are part of that village! We all need a village to keep our sanity today. The weight of the world does not rest on your shoulders alone. This is part of what went wrong for Jim. His village was too small. Family can't be your sole resource for help when a crisis arrives.

And know this..... You can't start to build a village when you are in crisis. You have to have it in place LONG BEFORE a crisis arrives if you are going to survive!

Looking back I see the “Jimmy quirks” were not simply quirks, they were symptoms. Symptoms of anxiety he chose to ignore and symptoms I just learned to live with.

His Symptoms List:

1. Locking doors behind him.
2. Always looking at the “negatives,” never even considering the positives.
3. Social Anxiety—“Why meet someone new? My old acquaintances are all I need for the rest of my life!”
4. Always “sick.” Do you “bang in” because you can’t take the stress at work?
5. Sleeping around the clock. Who sleeps 12–14 hrs/day? Someone who does constant battle with anxiety is exhausted at the end of the day.

Obviously now when I look at this list now...I clearly see a person prone to depression. Depression can be genetic or it can be brought on by a particular situation. Both played a part in Jim’s story.

He didn’t wake up one day and suddenly “catch” anxiety and depression. I am confident he was genetically predisposed to it. I never realized how great the struggle was until it was close to the end.

- Just “yesterday” he confided in me that whenever he applied for a job, he threw up from nerves.
- He couldn’t drive to the Sheriff’s out of town office without mapping out the route, driving it at least twice before he had to “go for real.”
- Drive in and out of Boston... forget about it...
- Talk with a professional about his worries – no way!

The most unfortunate thing of all is that if he faced his fears he was able to overcome them. He just lacked the insight to see the successes he had when he put mind over matter.

- He learned to drive to and from Maine.
- He was able to overcome his fear of public speaking when it mattered.
- He could meet with the feared physicians if he just went prepared.

Back to the depression: He was in severe depression for the last six months of his life. I was asking too much of him. He told everyone he “needed time off to care for his wife,” but in reality he was trying to hide his depression from his coworkers and deal with it all alone. He didn’t have a TEAM in place to assist with his troubles.

If he only understood what Solomon once wrote: “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but he who heeds counsel is wise.” Solomon suggests we seek and follow wise coaching. Don't go it alone. The risks are too great!

How is it I am here standing in front of you today? Easy: I have a huge support network that keeps me going. My team consists of friends, therapists, family, and others I consider life coaches. Even my bosses/coworkers are part of my team. In addition, I’ve had huge amounts of support from the Middlesex Sheriff’s Department.

Jim’s anxiety got in the way of his building a support network. His fears were so great he couldn’t face them. He actually made a heroic effort: he reached out to his family, he reached out to EAP, he attempted to give in to my requests that we get help...but in the end his anxiety clouded his judgment. He couldn’t cope with the overwhelming feelings of inadequacy/anxiety, and he couldn’t see there was a path forward.

Don't make the same mistake! Take the easy steps now before a crisis arrives. Become familiar with services that are available at work. Know that there is confidentiality in place if you need services. Respect your fellow co-workers privacy when you see/hear something you don't have any insight into. Cut them some slack. You never know what is going on behind the scenes, so why gossip about it?

If you are under stress at work or at home, then seek professional help! This is NOT a sign of weakness. You will NOT be judged. You will NOT be told how to handle a situation. You will NOT be forced to take meds.

How can this benefit you? You will get a sounding board, a mentor, someone who can outline options available to you that you may not have considered. Listen to the coach; s/he only offers suggestions. There is nothing negative about it. Physicians, psychiatrists and LCSW's are available to offer suggestions and hold your hand through a transition. You have an Employee Assistance Program available. You don't have to go it alone. You need only to be open to ways your life can improve. Think positive. You call all the shots!

Anxiety and Depression are very treatable. Seeking assistance with depression does not translate to "I am a failure." It is actually an empowering step to improve your own health and well-being. I hope you value yourself enough to utilize the resources available to you.

To those of you who don't experience this reality, you need to be aware of sudden changes in behavior. Look for dramatic mood changes, avoidance behaviors, weight loss, increased alcohol consumption, general malaise. Offer some support or point the person towards your EAP.

James A. Callahan, Jr. was a kind and loving man who wanted to protect his family from anything that wasn't kind and loving—to his own detriment. He was unable to reach out to the medical community, his coworkers, friends and family during his hour of need. To his thinking, this was a show of weakness. It filled him with shame and left him feeling alone in this world. In crisis he couldn't overcome these feelings. Don't let yourself get to this point.

I am confident some good can come from this tragedy. That's why I am here to contribute to the 2012 Conference on Correction Officer Wellness.

Remember:

- Depression kills.
- Awareness is the key to overcoming it.
- Action is the solution to the problem.

***Start Building Your Support Team, Your Village,
Today!***

Wish I understood PTSD long before 2012....