



Coping with Civil Unrest, Protests, and Demonstrations Focused on Police

CACP Psychological Services Committee July 2020

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The intensity and duration of protests and demonstrations in response to the killing of George Floyd have prompted general backlash against police all over the world. Police members and the public are experiencing higher tensions, which can tip over more easily into conflict when both are feeling on edge. Here are a few points to consider when working to build a healthy perspective around police-related protests and to help members cope with the stress of the current challenges.

Avoid “us versus them” thinking

The tone of the conversation around policing currently can frequently break down to an overly simplistic comparison – you’re either with the people or with the police. This type of “us versus them” thinking in any situation drives the two sides further apart and can lead people to become increasingly defensive and closed off to other perspectives. Remember, it’s not you versus them, you *are* them. We all live in the same communities, pass each other in the grocery aisles, take our kids to the same parks, and attend the same places of worship. Thinking of yourself as a community member first and a police officer second can help maintain an important perspective that prevents harmful “us versus them” thinking.

Protests are people giving voice to issues they feel are unheard, so listen when you can

Protests and demonstrations are fundamentally about raising awareness around issues people are passionately trying to improve. Groups experiencing inequality may feel unheard, unrecognized, or unrepresented, and may mobilize in hopes that their collective voice will be listened to by people in power. When interacting with protesters who are demonstrating civilly and peacefully, engaging in respectful dialogue and listening can help avoid escalation, as can occur in other policing situations. If protests turn violent, maintaining public safety takes precedence, but opportunities to listen should be considered wherever possible.

What you say and do is what matters most

Some police officers may be feeling very frustrated by the actions of other officers across the globe and may be angry about the impact of other officers’ actions towards eroding the hard-earned public trust in their communities. Regardless of the actions of others, individual actions still hold significant weight in the eyes of the public. There is no greater force for building an impression or changing someone’s mind about policing than the individual interactions an officer has with the public every day. Think back to all the times you made someone in the community feel comfortable in your presence where they were once apprehensive, or how grateful a victim or family member was for the kindness you showed them in their time of need. Individual officers cannot control what others who wear the badge say or do, but individual actions still matter and can make all the difference in the world one person at a time. As community leaders, police officers are also well positioned to serve as agents of social change. Individual officers can help create inclusive environments everywhere by actively objecting to, and discouraging, racism or other discriminatory behaviours.

If you feel your tension building when on the road or when interacting with the public, use your mental health skills

Tactical breathing, visualization, What's Important Now (WIN), and even just taking a break are all priorities when operating in a high stress environment. Maintaining control of your physical and emotional reactions through the application of your skills throughout your workday can help you calmly, rationally, and effectively meet challenges, helping you to provide safe and effective policing.

Talk to people inside and outside your policing circles about how current challenges make you feel

As with any emotionally-charged situation, speaking with people you trust is essential for helping you process your thoughts and feelings. Talking with trusted fellow police officers can help you work through your thoughts with peers who understand the pressures you are facing. Talking with trusted friends and family outside of policing can also be crucial to balancing your perspectives and keeping you grounded to your professional and personal values. Seeking out diverse conversations with trusted people can help you work through some of your feelings about the current challenges. You can also access your agency's support services for additional help coping with your daily pressures and the exceptional pressures currently facing police.

If you have children, build a sense of safety and confidence by reminding them of the person you are behind the badge

Younger children may have heard or been the target of negative comments about police at school. Older children may embrace or adopt anti-police sentiments as part of common youthful rebellion or due to social pressures. Children of all ages may be frightened that the anger towards police will make you more likely to get hurt while doing your job. Take time to speak with your children about the current challenges and the associated history and listen to how recent events have affected them – socially, morally, and emotionally. Use language and examples that are appropriate for their age and be honest about how you are feeling as well. If your children have questions about your job and how your work fits with what they are seeing and hearing in the news or at school, answer honestly, but also emphasize the other roles you play in their lives and the lives of your community – parent, coach, confidant, volunteer – show your children who you are as a person behind the badge. Remember that if your children are angry, their feelings may not be directed toward the person you are, but with how their understanding of your chosen career interacts with the current challenges. Build the confidence your children have in you by showing them your compassion, thoughtfulness, and moral strength through your interactions with them and your community.

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