



## Implementing the Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative

Jack A. Digliani, PhD, EdD  
Police Psychologist

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Implementing the Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative is not difficult. The elements of the Initiative are easily implemented by initiating processes, strategies, and programs already well known to law enforcement agencies.

The Initiative is not an “all or nothing” proposition. Various elements of the Initiative can be implemented independently of one another. Although it is best to move forward with the entire Initiative, a partial implementation is better than no implementation.

There is no “one right way” to implement the Initiative. It is ok to be creative. Make the *Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative* work for you.

#### Considerations and recommendations for implementing the elements of the Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative

#### **(1) The Initiative encourages: every officer to "self-monitor" and to take personal responsibility for his or her mental wellness.**

Implementation: Many officers are pretty good at picking up signs of distress in others. But as an officer, have you ever thought of applying this skill to yourself? Accomplishing this simply requires you to make an honest and ongoing self-assessment. Although denial can be or become an issue, many officers know when they are experiencing stress or trauma-related difficulty. However, knowing you are having difficulty is not enough. You must also know what to do about it and be willing to take action. One of the things that you can do about it is to talk to someone. Allow yourself to seek appropriate support and assistance.

#### **(2) The Initiative encourages: every officer to seek psychological support when confronting potentially overwhelming difficulties (officers do not have to "go it alone").**

Implementation: Why limit yourself to personal stress management ideas and strategies? You can supplement your solo stress management efforts by engaging outside support. Outside support comes in many varieties, ranging from talking with a trusted friend to professional counseling. Many times just talking it out will help you to see things differently and help you to feel better. The next time you feel stressed, take a chance. Talk to someone you trust. You may be pleasantly surprised at the outcome.

**(3) The Initiative encourages: every officer to diminish the sometimes deadly effects of secondary danger by reaching out to other officers known to be facing difficult circumstances.**

Implementation: Even if an officer is not exhibiting outward signs of distress, if you know that he or she is dealing with circumstances that would be difficult for nearly everyone, try reaching out. Too often, officers will shy away from other officers in distress for a variety of reasons, including not knowing what to say or do. But think about this – during years of policing and psychological practice I have had officers time after time talk about how an unanticipated kind word from another officer made a positive difference. It does not take much, and it's not like you need to form a life-long relationship. Sometimes just a few supportive words can make a remarkable difference.

**(4) The Initiative encourages: veteran and ranking officers to use their status to help reduce secondary danger (veteran and ranking officers can reduce secondary danger by openly discussing it, appropriately sharing selected personal experiences, avoiding the use of pejorative terms to describe officers seeking or engaging psychological support, and talking about the acceptability of seeking psychological support when confronting stressful circumstances).**

Implementation: Veteran and ranking officers are in a unique position to influence the police culture generally and organizational climate specifically. They can do this for better or for worse. If you are a veteran or ranking officer, make a positive difference. As mentioned, you can help to reduce secondary danger by openly discussing it, appropriately sharing selected personal experiences, avoiding the use of pejorative terms to describe officers seeking or engaging psychological support, and talking about the acceptability of seeking psychological support when confronting stressful circumstances.

**(5) The Initiative encourages: law enforcement administrators to better educate themselves about the nature of secondary danger and to take the lead in secondary danger reduction.**

Implementation: The conceptual distinction between police primary and secondary danger is relatively new. Police administrators should think through the notions of police primary and secondary danger, take the lead, and consider ways to reduce secondary danger within their agencies.

**(6) The Initiative encourages: law enforcement administrators to issue a departmental memo encouraging officers to engage psychological support services when confronting potentially overwhelming stress - the memo should include information about confidentiality and available support resources.**

Implementation: This is easily accomplished by administrators. All it takes is an understanding of what support services are available, learning about the limits of confidentiality, and a commitment to write and distribute such information in a departmental memo. If you are a police administrator, whether or not you support the entire Initiative, implementing this element would clarify your position, help to define your philosophy, contribute to a supportive organizational climate, and help to reduce secondary danger. A memo from the chief that identifies support services and encourages their use expresses a caring attitude and lets officers know that it is ok to seek support. This element alone has significant potential to help officers in distress.

**(7) The Initiative encourages: basic training in stress management, stress inoculation, critical incidents, posttraumatic stress, police family dynamics, substance use and addiction, and the warning signs of depression and suicide.**

Implementation: In nearly every jurisdiction there are qualified persons that are willing to train officers in the specified areas. Resources for this training include local or regional mental health facilities, community psychologists and counselors, area community colleges, local universities, academy cadre, and specially trained officers already within the department. Training in these areas should begin in recruit academy and continue throughout an officer's career.

**(8) The Initiative encourages: the development of programs that engage pre-emptive, early-warning, and periodic department-wide officer support interventions (for example, proactive annual check in, "early warning" policies designed to support officers displaying signs of stress, and regularly scheduled stress inoculation and critical incident stressor management training).**

Implementation: Initiating pre-emptive, early-warning, and periodic support programs is nothing new for law enforcement agencies. Many departments offer stress management refresher training periodically and have early warning officer-assist policies and programs already in place. These programs are designed to help officers cope with everyday stress and the potentially overwhelming stress of policing before it becomes an issue.

**(9) The Initiative encourages: law enforcement agencies to initiate incident-specific protocols to support officers and their families when officers are involved in critical incidents.**

Implementation: It takes some work but it is possible for an agency to develop a standardized protocol for dealing with critical incidents. The protocol can define "critical incident" and "officer-involved" to best fit departmental standards. It can also specify when the protocol should be engaged. Critical incident protocols not only help to standardize incident investigation, but can also be designed to reduce second injury, secondary trauma, and secondary danger. Incident protocols can be developed by and applicable to individual law enforcement agencies or they can be developed by and applicable to multiple jurisdictions. To implement this element of the Initiative, it takes someone to introduce the concept, secure administrative support, develop the protocol and have it approved, then put it into effect. Agencies with an officer-involved incident protocol have used a committee of officers and other professionals to develop it. Such committees have included officers, investigators, supervisors, administrators, district attorneys, peer support team members, and police psychologists.

**(10) The Initiative encourages: law enforcement agencies to create appropriately structured, properly trained, and clinically supervised peer support teams.**

Implementation: The efficacy of police peer support teams is well understood by police psychologists and many police administrators. To be most effective, police peer support teams must be formally established in policy and function under departmental written guidelines. Peer support team members should be trained by qualified personnel and receive ongoing training and clinical supervision. Clinical supervision provides a "ladder of escalation" and "support for the supporters." Several states have enacted legislation which provides members of police (and other) peer support teams with a degree of statutory confidentiality.

**(11) The Initiative encourages: law enforcement agencies to provide easy and confidential access to counseling and specialized police psychological support services.**

Implementation: Most departments provide insurance coverage for private psychologists and counselors, and many have developed Employee Assistance Programs. Some agencies also provide in-house psychological services. Regardless of the services provided, they must be easily accessible and remain confidential within the limits prescribed by law if officers are to view them as viable resources.

**(12) The Initiative encourages: police officers at all levels of the organization to enhance the agency climate so that others are encouraged to ask for help when experiencing psychological or emotional difficulties instead of keeping and acting out a deadly secret.**

Implementation: Police officers must remain aware that even seemingly innocuous verbal exchanges and unintentional nonverbal gestures can contribute to police secondary danger. To avoid this, officers of all ranks must act conscientiously, proactively, and consistently to reduce police secondary danger. This requires increased personal awareness and may require a significant shift in thinking for some officers. In this way, officers can positively affect their agency's organizational climate and thereby, the police culture.

The effects of the Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative are cumulative:  
the more elements implemented, the greater the effect.

**Asking for help does not mean “unfit for duty”**