

9

WAYS TO BUILD STRENGTH IN LAW ENFORCEMENT FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Research shows that when families are knowledgeable about law enforcement work and feel supported by their loved one's department, their relationships are stronger and more resilient. Building stronger and more resilient families leads to stronger and more resilient officers who feel supported both at work and at home.

By helping your family cope with the stress and worries that accompany the experience of having a family member in law enforcement, you can be a healthier and safer officer, better able to protect and serve.¹

1 Never Stop Communicating With Your Loved Ones

Communication, both verbal and nonverbal, is vital in every relationship. Whether it's with a spouse/partner, a child, a parent, or a dear friend, in our harried and hectic daily lives, we can often forget just how important simple conversations and caring acts are to maintaining a strong, healthy connection.

ACTION

There are countless ways you can show appreciation toward your significant other. For example, send a text to your spouse or partner right now, just letting them know you are thinking about them. Or pause before you get out of your vehicle when you arrive home and get in a positive mindset to walk through the door to see the ones you love. Simple gestures have lasting impacts.

3 Reduce Anxiety

The daily life of a law enforcement family is continuously hectic, stressful, and unpredictable, as officers often work long, erratic hours and may come home stressed and exhausted after being exposed to potentially life-threatening and traumatic situations.

This reality impacts the daily life and stress levels of law enforcement families and children. When an officer leaves for work, his or her family knows that he or she might not come home. That alone can create anxiety for everyone.²

ACTION

Consider limiting your exposure to triggers like news or violent TV shows—especially shows about law enforcement that may oversensationalize dangers. Talk about what you and your family can and cannot control. You CAN control what you read, watch, or listen to. You CANNOT control what people say. Building and nourishing a positive support system with family, friends, and peers is an effective way to diminish anxiety.

5 Emphasize Positivity

A positive attitude can help keep what's happening around you in perspective. Help your family find ways to deal constructively with negativity they might encounter. Ultimately, only you are in control of decisions about and responses to what goes on around you. Encourage seeking out other law enforcement families for coping ideas and support, while at the same time suggest limiting shop talk.*

ACTION

Plan an activity for your family to do together this weekend. Take a walk, go to the library, or play a friendly game of your favorite sport.

7 Practice Self-Care

Have you noticed when you are stressed and in a state of tension, it can be hard to think clearly or make smart, healthy decisions? Sometimes it can be really hard to make time for yourself and your family's care. Using self-care options are an excellent way to mitigate the anxiety and stress in your life.

Consider how you can take time for yourself and encourage your spouse/partner to do the same. Physical activity is a good medicine for stress and anxiety. Talking to trusted friends and family members can also be a great source of stress relief. Let them know that you don't expect them to solve a problem, but you're just asking them to lend an ear.*

ACTION

Sit down with your spouse/partner to determine a day and time of the week you can each dedicate to self-care. Better yet, try scheduling time to cook or take a walk together. Propose a good time to communicate!

9 Forgive Easily

The idea is not to get angry in the first place. But if you do, try to quickly forgive or ask for forgiveness. To forgive is to free yourself from what offended you, including the pain that came with it.

ACTION

Let go of your resentment and allow the slate to be cleared.

2 Respond Rather Than React

Emotions are normal. Sometimes how you react to a situation or a conversation can create conflict and tension with your loved ones. Understanding what works best for you and your loved one in having a difficult yet productive conversation can contribute to healthy and positive communication and strong relationships.*

ACTION

Everyone makes mistakes—many have learned this lesson the hard way. The next time you and your spouse or partner find yourselves in a disagreement that escalates, try to pause and consider “why this reaction?” Maybe something else is causing it? Consider tabling the conversation and plan to return to it later in the day or set a time to see if the response to the disagreement is better once emotional reactions have had time to cool.

4 Address Children's Concerns

As a parent, you may need to assist in helping your child(ren) distinguish between “possibility” and “probability.” It is possible that you could get hurt on the job, but not probable, as most officers go to work and come home safely every day.

Though you will not have all the answers, it is often enough to listen carefully to your children's concerns and reassure them that their feelings are normal. Sometimes your children won't be able to articulate their needs, but remember—for most kids—what they desire most is that their parents spend real, focused time with them.*

ACTION

Kids need positive activities to manage their emotions and stress as well. Develop a pre-shift goodbye routine with your child(ren). Create a unique handshake or phrase that you and your child(ren) can use to sign off with. Teach your children that it is okay to ask for help and destigmatize counseling to minimize barriers to asking for help later if needed.

6 Take the Long View

Being a law enforcement officer can be challenging for you and your family. No one ever said this job would be easy; it is hard at times to keep a positive outlook. It can feel like the stressful times will never end, but they will. Keeping a positive outlook and remembering the bigger picture can help. Remember to stay focused on the physical and mental health of yourself and your family.*

ACTION

Find an uplifting message or mantra that you like and post it in a high-traffic area of your home so that you all can see it. This will help remind you of the view to come rather than the view from the past.

8 Use Caution With Social Media and Blogs

Law enforcement officers often underestimate the support and respect they have in their communities. Social media has created new platforms to share that support across family, friends, and community. But it's also opened up more awareness to things that are happening across the country and the world. Unfortunately, social media also provides an easy platform for people to spew out hateful and destructive comments. Maybe there are times you and your family do not need to be exposed to all the hate speech that pops up on social media.*

ACTION

Consider creating a private Facebook page for department families if your agency permits this. Find and share positive examples of community support with your family members. Make all who are invited to the “private” page know they are not to share comments outside the group and are not to invite outsiders into the group.

¹ Lorraine Green and Ellen Kirschman, *Online Education, Resources, and Support for Law Enforcement Families: Final Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2001).

² Sarah Buehner, *Supporting Family & Children of Law Enforcement Officers*. Ifcsmo.org/supporting-family-children-of-law-enforcement-officers.

* Ellen Kirschman, *I Love a Cop: What Police Families Need to Know*, revised ed. (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2006).

