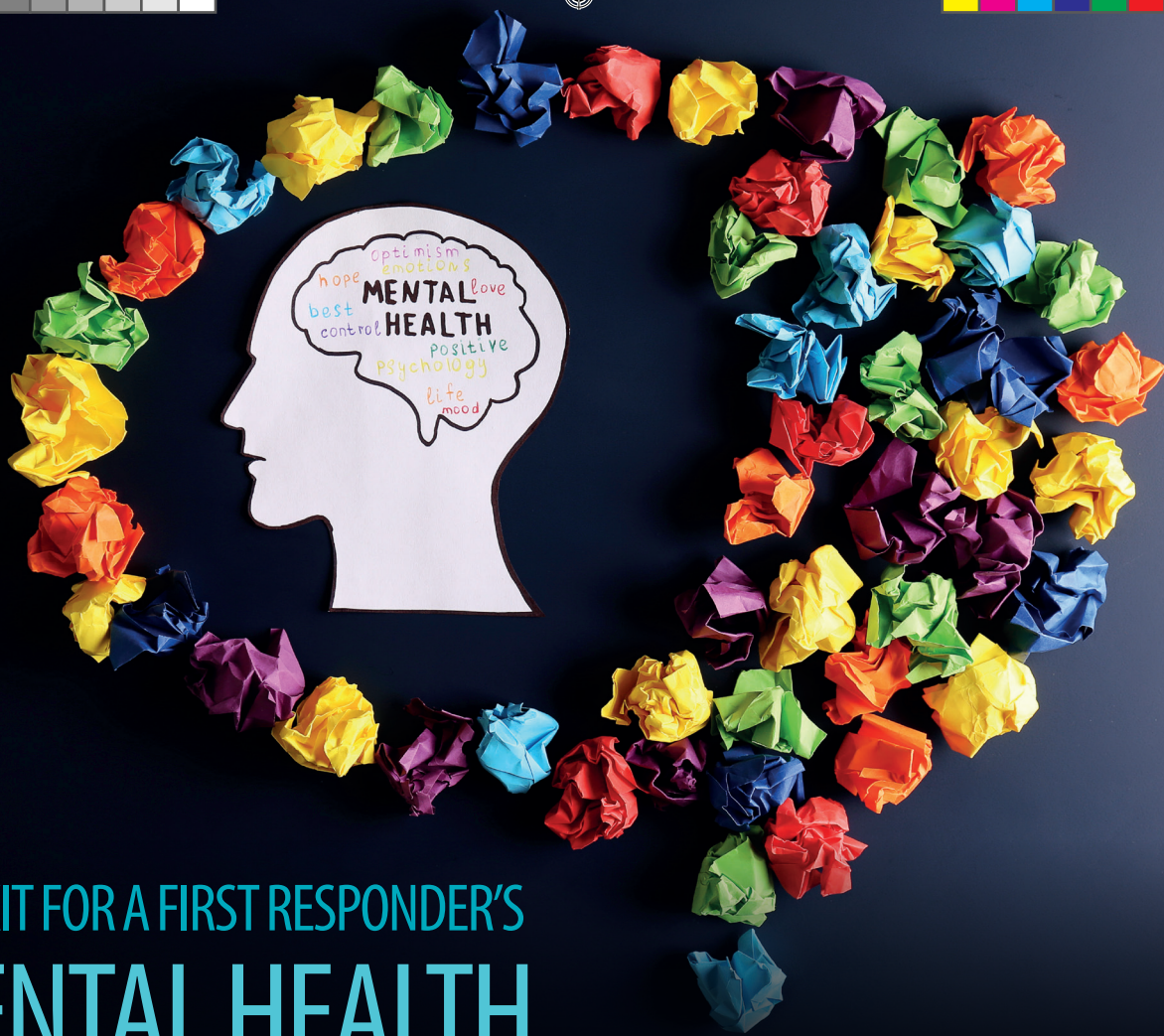


FEATURE



## TOOLKIT FOR A FIRST RESPONDER'S MENTAL HEALTH

Mark Sheehan discusses some tools to cope with mental distress



MARK SHEEHAN

Within three years of frontline service as a garda, my mother informed me, “You’ve changed as a person”. I dismissed her observations. After all, what did she know. At that time, I believed that my new policing experiences had shown me what the “real” world was like. I had seen so much. Things and people were right or wrong, lawful or unlawful, black and white.

Perhaps this outlook seems familiar to you.

Frontline police work is internationally recognised as a highly stressful and traumatic occupation resulting in a larger proportion

of police officers suffering with their mental health (studies show three times higher internationally) than the general public.

It’s an exciting lifestyle filled with the ups and downs of an emotional rollercoaster. One of the main attractions of police work is that no day is the same, every tour of duty is a different experience requiring skills and new abilities to navigate. First responders always have the most interesting stories to tell which quickly becomes apparent when exchanging work experiences with other professions. Being exposed to chronic trauma, it may be difficult for first responders to recognise that they work and live in a highly emotional environment as it quickly becomes a police officer’s normality.

Garda training neglects preparing the

frontline police officer for impacts to their mental health. Advices to dealing with the upset acquired from dealing with distressing incidents were ambiguous, such as having a pint with a colleague after a difficult time (alcohol now recognised as a depressant). Historically, this ignorance of what a traumatised member should do may have been acceptable but with increased research in the area of trauma, it now falls tragically short, evidenced with a four times higher suicide rate with An Garda Síochána members than the public.

A cultural change with professionalism replacing the vocational work ethos in An Garda Síochána and members now travelling long distances to work as well as not interacting outside the work environment, the social support within AGS is dissipating. This reduces opportunities to ameliorate upset and trauma amongst peers especially amongst younger police officers who experience a higher amount of traumatic incidents.

Initially mental illness can be an invisible

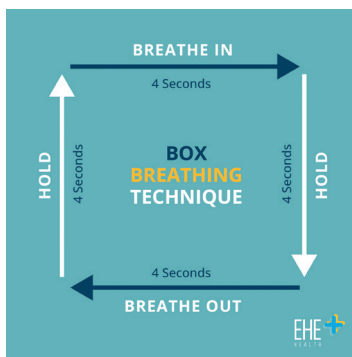


injury with many unaware that they are suffering. Chronic unease has become their current normality. It is only those around the ill person who may notice any change in behaviour and with the chaotic nature of the policing environment, unusual or reserved behaviours can pass unnoticed. Mental health difficulties only become apparent when the illness causes obvious crises such as relationship breakdowns, emotional outbursts, public complaints, poor work practices and discipline issues.

Research shows that having mental health issues isolates a person and it holds a great amount of stigma for gardaí, dissuading many from seeking supports.

Mindfulness and resilience to enhance mental health have become buzzwords in modern times but little knowledge of their self-application has been provided to gardaí.

Below are three tools to assist with mental distress:



#### Instant tool - box breathing

Box breathing, part of US Navy seal training, before and after incidents reduces stress and improves mood by inducing a neuro biofeedback loop, lowering blood pressure, reducing heartbeat, moderating adrenaline levels countering the “red mist” effect and provides an opportunity for reflection. This simple to learn tool has enormous positive feedback from users.

#### Daily tool - journal writing for stress reduction. “Don’t bring the job home.”

International studies show that police officers are three times more likely to engage in domestic violence with their families than the general population. The police persona adopted by officers to gain compliance from the public willingly or unwillingly can be transported into the home environment unknowingly by

an officer who fails to recognise the difference between their professional and private lives.

Research shows that Australian police officers who completed journal entries after their shifts on their journey home reduced their stress, anxiety and depression levels within three weeks. Outlining their feelings on paper served as an outlet and a stress reducing tool. Police officers who spent 15 minutes a day writing about their strong emotions and what they planned to do about their emotions evidenced lowered stress and anxiety levels.

#### Lifetime tool - maintaining circles of support

Relationships are proven to maintain, improve and repair your mental and physical health. Your goal should be to have a happy and connected life which requires your positive interaction with others. Human isolation has profound physiological and physical effects. The creation of layered circles of support that are independent of each other provides



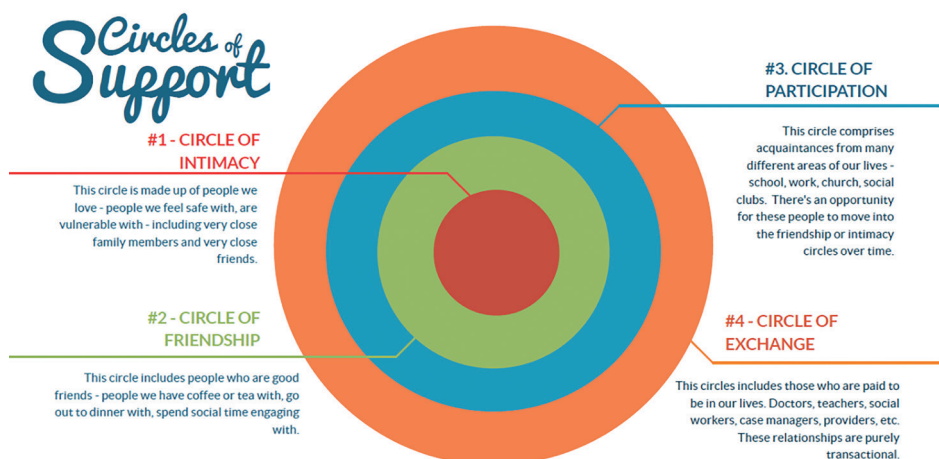
### RESEARCH SHOWS THAT HAVING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES ISOLATES A PERSON AND IT HOLDS A GREAT AMOUNT OF STIGMA FOR GARDÁÍ, DISSUADING MANY FROM SEEKING SUPPORTS

a constant source of support should a single support (such as an intimate partner) drop away. Thus, membership of various social, family and sporting groups provides the healthiest situation for a person.

Unfortunately, no panacea cure-all exists for everyone. We are all individuals. It remains your own decision to engage with practices that suit your own personality and ensure your mental wellbeing. The tools above are by no means an exclusive list of supports and I encourage everyone to seek supports wherever they can be found.

If you find another good one, please share it. Conversations amongst peers sharing skills that moderate trauma and stress benefit all. **GR**

**Sergeant Mark Sheehan** is based in Wicklow Garda Station and holds a Master’s degree in Counselling and Psychotherapy and a higher diploma in Social Studies – Social Care..



Circles of Support - Based on the work of Judith Snow, Jack Pearpoint, and Marsha Forest

