

NOTHING TO SEE HERE MOVE ON

Mark Sheehan completed a dissertation entitled 'Attitudes of frontline gardaí to mental health / wellness supports'. He discusses his findings from 620 frontline Garda respondents



Probationer's Account

I recall finding my first body on duty. Three decades later, if I close my eyes, I can still see her sitting there in her chair in front of her TV with the woollen blanket over her knees. The senior colleague with me was so non-plussed and casual about it, I followed his lead and adopted the same outward manner. Yet inside, I was horrified, my heart was racing. I was shocked and totally unsure of what to do. I had never had to do anything like this before.

This set the pattern for my years of service, until I too learned to disassociate from the trauma my job required me

to experience and join in the police cultural belief that police work is normal.

The only therapy available was the telling of 'War Stories' in groups of police to inadvertently assist in processing the unusual work we do.

Public order, road traffic collisions and other traumatic incidents; we've all waved on passers-by from such scenes. The media is full of such images. A picture tells a story. But what message are we giving?

International Police

Police work is recognised as a stressful and traumatic profession. Police officers suffer high rates of mental illness. Uniquely, because of their work, frontline police officers are subjected to primary, secondary and vicarious traumas on a chronic basis. International studies of 283,000 police officers from varied countries informs that police officers are three times more likely to experience suicidal ideation, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety than others.

An Garda Síochána

There has been little analysis of mental health levels amongst frontline members of An Garda Síochána but Garda suicide rates are reported to be four times the national average and the GRA's 2018 Wellness study indicated





a 16% rate of PTSD and a 27% subthreshold level amongst its 2200 respondents displaying an undisclosed phenomenon.

2022 Survey

In 2002, as part of my Master's Degree in Counselling and Psychotherapy, I completed a dissertation entitled 'Attitudes of Frontline Gardaí to Mental Health / Wellness Supports'. This study of 620 frontline gardaí displayed interesting current beliefs. It revealed that 44% of gardaí surveyed had paid for private mental health supports and 28% had used An Garda Síochána's employee assistance services.

Privately, 68% of gardaí agreed that psychotherapy would be useful and 73% would want psychological help if they were worried or upset for a long period of time. 77% stated that psychotherapy was an effective treatment and 66% agreed that medication worked.

Over half agreed that someone can make a full recovery from severe mental health illness, with only 11% disagreeing. These figures shows that privately, individual frontline

gardaí have a positive attitude towards mental health supports and the covert widespread use of private mental health therapies.

But three quarters of those surveyed felt that fellow gardaí would not seek professional help if they were experiencing a mental illness and that 63% of members believed that most colleagues would view being treated for a mental illness as a sign of personal failure.

85% of gardaí stated that they would not disclose to a colleague that they were experiencing a mental illness and 96% would not inform An Garda Síochána management/supervisors. This view was consistent across all age groups (18-30yrs/30-45yrs/45-60yrs) despite the World Health Organisation studies stating that younger people are more open to discussing mental health issues than older people. It appears that police culture

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Message to Public:

Nothing to see here, don't look, nothing traumatic here to see. Move on!

Message to Colleagues:

Nothing to see here, don't look at me. I'm not traumatised, nothing traumatic here to see. Move on!

Message to Self:

Nothing to see here, don't look inside, I'm telling myself that I'm not traumatised, nothing traumatic here to see. Move on!

they are immune to mental distress due to such factors as inner stoicism, training, experience and false personification.

The Future

Montreal police service introduced a suicide awareness programme in 2001 for staff that resulted in a 78% reduction in suicide rates, while neighbouring police services noted an 11% increase. 95% of gardaí surveyed were in favour of such a programme showing a desire for more openness and information relating to their personal mental health.

Traditionally, Nothing to see here, Move on! hasn't served us well.

Asking for help is not a sign of weakness but an indication of strength.

If you are experiencing mental health difficulties, the first step of seeking support is the most difficult.

This study showed that many of your colleagues have already taken that step to improve their mental health but the subject of mental health remains organisationally taboo. I encourage anyone to seek support sooner rather than later. Starting conversations around mental health may be initially uncomfortable but will save colleagues lives, maybe one day yours. **GR**

If any personal issues have resulted you can seek support from Garda Employee Assistance: 01 8980120. 24/7 Independent Counselling Service: 1800-817433. Aware: 01-6617211.

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may have a stronger influence than modern cultural norms on younger gardaí.

Pluralistic Ignorance

This disparity between private beliefs and the perceptions of the group belief shows that pluralistic ignorance around the area of mental health exists amongst members of An Garda Síochána which is where a person mistakenly believes that their group holds a different belief than themselves.

The survey also displayed that stigma, a feeling of disgrace and negative feeling, surrounds the area of mental health for gardaí. Survey participants (86%) believed that they would be discriminated against at work if they disclosed that they were experiencing a mental health illness with 80% feeling it would be detrimental to career prospects.

Male gardaí were found to be less open to discussing mental health and are potentially more susceptible to a belief of 'Rugged Individualism' as described by Richard Armitage's book on Police Suicide where police officers believe that