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*Book Review*

## **Breaking the Barriers: Changing the Way We Support the Physical and Mental Health of Police Officers**

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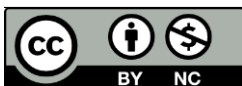
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**Book:** Breaking the Barriers: Changing the Way We Support the Physical and Mental Health of Police Officers, by Ronald A. Rufo. (AMR Publishers, 2021), 234 pages, ISBN-10: 1736202106 (hardcover), ISBN-13: 978-1736202104 (hardcover).

**Keywords:** : police officer, police department, mental health, mental health treatment, police suicide, police culture, post-traumatic stress disorder, United States.



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Ronald A. Rufo's book, *Breaking the Barriers Changing the Way We Support the Physical and Mental Health of Police Officers*, should be required reading for every police officer, whether a rookie fresh out of the academy or a seasoned veteran. The author, a retired Chicago police officer, tackles the topic of police officer mental health using his own experiences, those of other law enforcement professionals, and mental health providers. His purpose is to provide police officers with awareness about mental health and to encourage them to seek help so they may find "peace in their lives". [1]

Rufo covers the history of law enforcement over the last 100 years, including corruption, police brutality, the inception of the police investigating the police and later civilian boards, and efforts to increase transparency and accountability. He addresses more recent incidents involving the police, including the Laquan McDonald shooting in Chicago and George Floyd's death in Minneapolis, resulting in racial tension and a "climate of mistrust for law enforcement".[2]

Rufo then addresses the police culture and how the culture has contributed to mental health challenges. One aspect of that culture is the belief by police officers that they should not share their feelings and should just "suck it up".[3] The author believes that mentality is taught, beginning in the police academy, where new officers are taught to be in control, do not show weakness, and never show emotion.[4]

Rufo then identifies the stressors in law enforcement, including always being on guard, shift work, court appearances, the mayhem officers witness, and the potential of being severely hurt or killed. In addition to those stressors, he adds additional stressors of the internal politics of a police department, the homelife disruptions caused by shift work, having other jobs to make ends meet, or officers attending school to improve their opportunities, and the more recent "I hate the cops" era.[5]

Rufo takes the next step, making the connection that those stressors can lead to depression, sleep deprivation, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), alcohol and substance abuse, divorce, and suicide. The author indicated, "depression is often considered the number one reason most police officers take their own life".[6] One critical incident can lead to PTSD and most police officers deal with multiple critical incidents in a 20-to-30-year career. The author quotes former Attorney General Bill Barr indicating, "The rate of suicide among those in law enforcement and firefighting is 40 percent higher than the national average".[7]

Once he has identified the issues, Rufo looks at solutions, starting with seeking mental health treatment, identifying types of therapy, utilizing peer support or other types of employee assistance programs, and addressing emotional and physical wellness. Seeking mental health treatment is still a big hurdle, in part because some agencies have not embraced the push to address police officers' mental health needs. Rufo provides examples of agencies that have seen the benefits of having a mental health program and have made it a priority.

The author includes an entire chapter on Chateau Recovery, who have a history of helping first responders. The three pillars of Chateau Recovery Program are the whole self, mindset, and resilience. The whole self-pillar is about exploring all dimensions of yourself and "understanding your unique development, needs, and resources while preparing for the journey forward".[8] The mindset pillar is about accepting that none of us are perfect while working towards the best version of yourself. The resilience pillar is about building skills to have a healthy and resilient relationship with stress and change.

Peer support utilizes trained officers to “assist police officers and their immediate families in crisis situations”.<sup>[9]</sup> The author identifies one of the benefits of a peer support program is that the peer support program is not an employer or human resources initiative, which need to follow employment laws and policies. That means no notes are taken and whatever is said is confidential.

Rufo believes wellness starts with a person’s outlook on life. He also thinks agencies need to do more to focus on officers’ well-being. The author observed, “Many officers who have been in law enforcement for quite some time have gradually lost their enthusiasm for the job, and, it seems, for life itself”.<sup>[10]</sup> To improve well-being, he addresses resilience and addresses getting proper sleep, diet, and exercise. The author identifies alternative therapies to help with well-being, including acupuncture, hypnosis, the Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT), yoga, Tai Chi, and Reiki. He then touches on financial wellness.

Rufo closes the book with thoughts and recommendations from many of the police officers and mental health professionals interviewed for the book. The author believes officers can achieve and sustain emotional intelligence through “physical, psychological, and spiritual wellness”.<sup>[11]</sup> This can be attained through eating properly, exercise, being optimistic, utilizing stress management techniques, being supportive of one another, learning to forgive themselves and others, and using techniques to relax their mind. In the end, he provides “A Police Officer’s Prayer”, which, among other things, asks for courage to face their fears, strength of spirit, compassion, and support.<sup>[12]</sup>

As a retired police officer and member of a peer support team, in a major metropolitan city, Rufo provides a veteran police officer’s perspective. The many stories, from Rufo, other police officers, and mental health providers gives credibility and provides specific examples of what police officers encounter, how they choose to deal with those things, and the results of seeking or failing to ask for help.

Rufo uses statistics, like police officer “stress felt increased tenfold”, but provides no source cite or documentation to back that up.<sup>[13]</sup> By citing sources, it would add additional credibility to his message. There are studies that identify the significantly higher numbers of traumatic events among public safety personnel compared to the general public.<sup>[14]</sup> In the chapter on PTSD, Rufo failed to make that connection that compounding trauma has a cumulative effect, leading to complex PTSD.<sup>[15]</sup>

I have been in law enforcement for thirty-six years and have investigated accidental deaths, suicides, and homicides, some of which children were the victims. I have also attended too many police officer funerals. While reading the book, I teared up a few times. Even though I have worked on my emotional wellbeing, the trauma is still there, and occasionally reminds me of its presence.

The book was easy to read and provided a thorough discussion of the mental health issues faced by police officers and solutions and therapies to become and maintain wellness. I would recommend new officers, veterans, retired officers, and police officer family members read Rufo’s book. Rufo wrote the book with the hope he could save one life. My optimistic view is that, if read, Rufo’s book will help many police officers and their families.

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None

## **Disclosures**

None.

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## Endnotes

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