

The Salt Lake Tribune

Tribune editorial: When the job tears them down, police officers need to call for backup



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Brent Jex's story isn't over.

Jex is the subject of "Officer in Distress," Tribune Senior Managing Editor Matt Canham's wrenching deep dive into the stress of police work and its consequences. If there is one thing that hangs over the series wrapping up in Sunday's paper, it is that police are asked to witness too much without having it affect them.

That is not how brains work. The mind doesn't just let go, and cop work is full of moments that need to be let go.

One such moment came when Jex was already reeling from guilt and anxiety over dead colleagues. He had to respond to a West Jordan home where a baby girl was unconscious. He recalled the taste of salty mucus while he was giving her mouth-to-mouth to try and revive her.

She died, and nine months later he was still tasting her mucus in a panic attack.

Jex is not unique, at least not in what he has been forced to process. But his willingness to lay it all out in excruciating detail may help other officers both recognize their own warning signs and overcome the resistance to seek professional help. As president of the state's largest police union, the Fraternal Order of Police, Jex takes the fraternal part seriously.

The crescendo of "Officer in Distress" comes in the realization that police work is an impossible challenge. No one person can truly keep the peace, and no one can be expected to perform flawlessly every time in the split-second decisions in which life and death hang, even a veteran like Jex.

It's that admission that is really at the heart of interpreting not just the mental anguish of police officers but also the anguish of everyone who has to live with police decisions. Jex, like most in law enforcement, recoils at the narrative that racial disparities in police shootings are a failure of police.

But his experience has also taught him that some of those officers may not be in their right minds when triggers are pulled. The burden of the jobs and their unwillingness to share that burden — with their families, with their friends, with professional counselors — can cloud those split-second decisions.

Jex's story isn't over because now he's telling others. When the taste of a dying child lingers for months, you need help.

The Tribune will further explore the challenges of police work and mental health with experts at a special TribTalk Live May 24 at 7 p.m. at the Salt Lake City Library. Watch for details in the paper and on sltrib.com.

