



# First 24 Hours After a Difficult Call


A simple guide for getting through the first day after something difficult – without carrying it alone.



# The First Day Can Feel Different

After a difficult call, your body and mind do not simply return to baseline. The nervous system stays activated – scanning for threat, replaying what happened, trying to process what it just witnessed. That response is not weakness. It is biology.

Officers describe the first day in many ways: **hyper-alert and unable to wind down**, bone-tired but unable to sleep, emotionally flat, unexpectedly tearful, irritable over small things, or simply numb. All of these are normal responses to an abnormal situation. You may cycle through several of them in a single afternoon.

 There is no single "right" way to feel after a hard call. What you are experiencing right now is a response – not a verdict on who you are.

# Focus on the Basics First

When the mind is overloaded, keep the task list short. The body needs simple support before anything else can help. Work through this checklist before the end of your shift or within the first few hours home.



## Water

Stress dehydrates. Drink a full glass before anything else.



## Food

Even something small. A meal stabilizes blood sugar and mood.



## Sleep

Rest matters even if it does not come easily tonight. Protect the opportunity.



## Breathing

Box breathing or slow exhales signal safety to your nervous system.



## Shower

Hot water helps the body transition out of high-alert mode.



## Movement

A short walk or stretch – nothing intense. Just get the body moving.



## Quiet Time

Ten minutes of silence, no screens. Let the noise settle on its own.

# Watch the Isolation Pull

One of the most common reactions after a hard call is the urge to pull away – to go quiet, stay in the car a little longer, avoid the people at home, or tell everyone you are fine when you are not. That pull feels protective. Sometimes a few hours alone is genuinely what you need.

But extended isolation after a traumatic event can increase mental replaying, amplify stress, and make the experience feel heavier than it needs to. The mind loops when it has no outlet. Even brief, low-pressure contact with a trusted person can interrupt that cycle.

**Ask yourself:** Who is one safe person I could check in with today – even just a short text or a few minutes on the phone? You do not have to explain everything. You just have to not disappear.

- ❑ A safe person does not need to be another officer. It can be a partner, a sibling, a chaplain, or a peer support contact – anyone who will not judge you for having a rough day.

# Do Not Judge the Reaction Too Fast

## What You Might Notice

- Feeling fine one hour, overwhelmed the next
- Anger that seems out of proportion
- Difficulty concentrating on routine tasks
- Physical symptoms – headache, tight chest, fatigue
- Replaying specific moments on a loop
- Wanting to talk about it, then not wanting to at all

## What It Means

Reactions shift hour to hour in the first 24 hours. That is not instability – it is the nervous system working through something it was not designed to ignore.

Feeling off after a bad call does not automatically mean something is wrong with you. It means something difficult happened and your body is responding appropriately.

The window for evaluation is wider than one afternoon. Give yourself at least a few days before drawing conclusions about how you are doing.

- ✔ If reactions persist beyond 2–3 weeks or begin interfering with daily function, that is a signal to reach out to a peer support officer, EAP counselor, or mental health professional – not a reason for shame.

# Create a Short Recovery Plan

You do not need a long-term strategy right now. You need a plan for the next few hours. Answer these three prompts honestly – even just in your head. Writing them down adds a layer of clarity.

## One thing I need today:


Not what you think you should need – what your body or mind is actually asking for right now. Rest? Noise? Quiet? Someone nearby?

## One thing I am avoiding:

Alcohol, screens, isolation, that one conversation? Name it. Awareness of the avoidance is the first step to choosing differently.

## One thing that may help me reset:

A walk, a call, cooking a meal, a workout, ten minutes outside. Pick something small and concrete – then do it before the day ends.

 This is not a wellness program. It is just today. One small plan, one foot in front of the other. That is enough for right now.

# You Are Allowed to Not Be Fine

## You do not have to "just suck it up" and carry this silently.

That expectation – the one that says officers should absorb everything without any visible effect – is one of the most damaging myths in law enforcement. It has cost careers, relationships, and lives. It is not toughness. It is avoidance dressed up as strength.

Getting through a bad call well is not about pretending it did not affect you. It is about taking the next small step with honesty – a glass of water, one conversation, eight hours horizontal, a single honest answer to a simple question.

### Peer Support

Contact your department's peer support team. They have been there.

### EAP Services

Your Employee Assistance Program offers confidential counseling – often same-day.

### 988 Crisis Line

Call or text 988 anytime. Press option 1 for the Veterans & First Responders line.

You showed up when it mattered. Now let someone show up for you.

