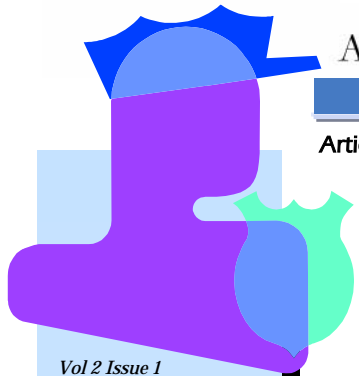


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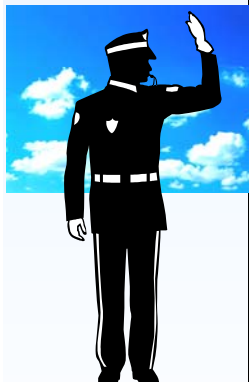
As part of **Technical Assistance Consultation & Training Services (TACTS)**

Articles submitted by **Richard Crino, RN, CTR, / Vice-President of Acute & Critical Incident Services**



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Reaching out for help is a sign of strength, not weakness. If you or one of your family members are in need of mental health or substance abuse treatment, contact one of your peer support counselors or give us a call at **235-7120** for a confidential consultation. We are available 24 hrs. a day/7 days per week.



## Recognition and Response to Mental Illness

In this article I'd like to address a very important officer safety issue – recognition and response to mental illness. Police officer's come in contact with emotionally disturbed suspects every day while performing their duties. While many officers view these calls as a nuisance or a waste of time, veteran officers have learned through experience that, if not handled well, they can escalate to a deadly force encounter.

### Psychosis will cause a person to misread what they see, hear and experience

Psychosis is a term used to describe a person whose thoughts are not based in reality. Individuals who are psychotic may experience auditory hallucinations, such as hearing voices, or may experience bizarre false beliefs, which are called delusions. It is believed that delusions like believing that one's food is poisoned, or that an external force such as god, the devil or a popular political figure is controlling ones actions, is due to a malfunctioning of the brains filtering system called the thalamus.

All incoming messages to the brain are first received by our senses (sight, smell, taste, hearing and touch) before being relayed to the thalamus. The thalamus, working as a switch board operator for the brain, quickly evaluates the receiving message from our senses and directs the brain into action.

In psychosis, and in particular with people diagnosed with the most common psychotic disorder, Schizophrenia, this filtering system malfunctions. This brain malfunction will cause a person to misread or miscalculate what they see, hear and experience in their environment. What most of us see as simple occurrences of everyday life are transformed into life threatening situations by the psychotic individual. Their "busted filter" sends the wrong message into the brain which most often translates into chaotic, inappropriate responses that generate a 911 call to police.

### What should you do when faced with a psychotic individual on the street?

The following are general guidelines and effective de-escalating techniques, which should assist you when interacting with an unarmed psychotic individual.

Remember, their filter is not working properly so they may misperceive or miscalculate your actions.

One officer does the talking. A psychotic individual will have trouble focusing and concentrating. Focusing on one is easier then trying to focus on multiple speakers.

Remember to keep a safe distance. Do not compromise your safety, as a person with mental illness may misread your actions. Do not touch the individual, as this may precipitate a violent reaction.

Call for less lethal options to be brought to the site ASAP! A less lethal option, such as the taser, is especially useful in psychosis and in preventing suicide. Suicide by cop is a situation in which a suicidal individual attempts to get a police officer to shoot them. The taser is highly effective in these situations.

Introduce yourself, and try to get the name of the person if possible. For example, "I am Officer Jones with the Providence Police Department. Could I have your name please?"

Make it clear to the person that you are not there to harm them but rather you are there to help them, as they may be paranoid. Just assume that the psychotic individual is frightened of you. You could use statements such as "I am here to help you. I will keep you and others safe. I will help you stay in control and not let anyone harm you."

If the person appears to be hallucinating, attempt to refocus them on your voice. For example you might say, "I don't want you to listen to any other voice but mine. Listen

*(Continued on page 2- Mental Illness)*

*Peer support counselors are specially trained police officers who provide support and assistance to colleagues during personal and professional crisis.*

# Training Police Officers Throughout New England



**NRI Community Services** is an accredited, progressive, non-profit, community agency providing mental health, substance abuse, and elder case management, education and training, employment, and housing services. NRICS has received national recognition for many of its programs based on client outcomes.

[www.NRICommunityServices.org](http://www.NRICommunityServices.org)

*(Mental Illness Continued)*

## Try to get them to refocus their attention on you

until the person responds to you. Remember, you are trying to get them to refocus their attention on you, as hallucinations will alter their ability to focus on your commands.

Try to limit noise, sirens and chaos at the scene. It's much easier for a person experiencing psychosis to focus if background noise is reduced.

## Psychotic people may seem to have super human strength

Other less lethal options are preferred. In most cases the suspect becomes more frightened and aggressive after being sprayed. It's also important to remember that psychotic individuals may present with what appears to be super human strength! This is believed to be caused by large amount of stress hormones pouring into their system at the time of crisis. This explains the importance of avoiding physical restraint and control techniques until the individual is a clear threat to you or others.

Use a neutral voice tone. Do not raise your voice unless the person is not responding to your neutral voice tone.

If possible tell them what you are going to do before you do it. Making quick or abrupt moves can startle a mentally ill person into physical aggression as a self protective action. Remember they may misperceive your intentions (clogged filter), so explain yourself for better communication.

Find out if they are on medication or if they are in treatment with a mental health provider. This will help you determine whether psychiatric issues exist and where to refer the person if there is no imminent risk.

Give clear instructions and repeat yourself until the person looks at you and responds. "Sir I need you to sit down before I can figure out how I can help you today." Getting an emotionally disturbed person to sit down gives you valuable information regarding the suspect's willingness to comply. Offering structure and direction also helps the person begin to regain control.

In most cases the psychotic individual will need to be transported to the local emergency room for further evaluation.

If physical restraint is needed make sure you have enough assistance on hand to secure each limb. Also insure that one officer is responsible for the head to prevent biting. And don't forget to maintain an open airway to avoid respiratory issues in the suspect.

Do not act alone! Always have back-up available. Sometimes all it takes is a show of force to get an emotionally disturbed person to agree to your plan.

It's best to not agree with or discount individual's delusional thoughts. For example, if a delusional person feels that their water is poisoned statements like, "Your water is not poisoned," or, "I've arrested the terrorist that poisoned your water supply," are not helpful statements. While this may

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work in the short term it does nothing for the officer or the department's credibility with this person in the future. Statements like "my job is to keep you safe and I will not let anyone harm you," or "I will see to it that you get the help you need tonight," are more helpful and less confrontational.

And lastly, remember that the emotionally disturbed person with severe and persistent mental illness is usually less of a threat to you than the common criminal. The non-mentally ill criminal is trying to deceive, lie and distract you to get the upper hand. The mentally ill person is confused, frightened and unable to make sense of the world around him. They need you to guide them to safety and treatment—not incarceration. The good news is that you can still maintain all of your officer safety skills while following the above recommendations—keeping you, your colleagues and the mentally ill person away from a deadly force encounter.

## Studies Suggest Use of the Taser is Safe

By Richard Crino, RN, CTR / Vice President of Acute & Critical Incident Services

A recent study of nationwide use of the Taser suggests that this less lethal option is safe and causes low risk of injuries to both the suspect and the involved officers (Wake Forest University School of Medicine, 2008). Of the 1000 cases of Taser use examined by the researchers, 99.7% of them had either no injuries, or minor injuries! In a second related study by the Wake Forest researchers to measure the effects of taser use on cardiac health, 28 police officers underwent 1, 3 and 5 second exposures to the Taser X-26. The results were impressive! Normal heart rhythm was recorded before and after each exposure. No cardiac abnormalities were detected. Pulse and blood pressure readings were slightly elevated as expected (no health risk). The researchers concluded that the Taser exposure in both studies appeared to be safe with no increased risk to cardiac health in the population tested.

More information on this research can be obtained via the Wake Forest University Medical Center website.

For information regarding in custody deaths in cases of taser usage visit this NIJ site:

<http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/222981.pdf>

