



Resiliency for Public Safety Professionals in 2021

[Chief Harry P. Dolan \(Ret.\)](#)

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This has been an unprecedented year—a pandemic with the associated lockdowns, an economic recession, protests, riots, rising violent crime in most major cities and a bitterly-contested national election. Public safety professionals have responded to increasing numbers of calls for domestic violence, suicides, drug overdoses, and rioting. Police, fire, and EMS personnel have been harmed in riots and face the danger of COVID exposure with every call they handle.

Despite these selfless acts to help others, the nationwide anti-police movement has intensified with media coverage that is often biased, violent protests, and political grandstanding to the point of calls to defund or even abolish the police. Violent criminals have been let out of jails and prisons early while politicians are calling for officers to aggressively arrest ordinarily law-abiding citizens for going to the beach, operating businesses or not wearing a mask in public.

A lot of bad stuff has happened in 2020, and it has seriously impacted mental health across the nation.

A nationwide survey of 3,409 adults conducted in August, 2020 by the American Psychological Association revealed the impact the events of 2020 have had on Americans. More than 70% of the American adults surveyed reported recent symptoms of depression. Those surveyed indicated that in the prior two weeks they felt so tired that they sat around and did nothing (75%), felt very restless (74%), found it hard to think properly or concentrate (73%), felt lonely (73%), or felt miserable or unhappy (71%). Half of those surveyed indicated that they felt far more stress in their lives than they had felt in 2019. Compared to last year, 21% reported feeling greater tension in their bodies, 20% reported getting angry more quickly, 20% reported an increase in mood swings, and 17%

admitted yelling at loved ones more often than last year.ⁱ **It is likely that these numbers are even higher for those who work in public safety.**

This is a serious risk to our careers, our relationships, and our health. **What are some ways we can better manage the incredible stress in our lives right now? I'm no psychologist, but I have survived a 32-year career in law enforcement, including two decades as a police chief, and all the stresses such a career involves.** I survived the career with my sanity and marriage intact, and raised three great kids in the process. So, in this time of unprecedented stress, **here is a little advice –you can't do it all so focus on what matters.**

The Pareto Principle

The Pareto Principle from the field of economics suggests that there are always limited resources and a large variety of tasks to perform. **If we try to do everything, and give equal emphasis to each task, we will end up in work paralysis and either nothing will get done, or nothing will get done well.** The Pareto Principle suggests that of the many tasks on our plates each day, usually only about 20% are crucial and these few tasks (if done well) will account for 80% of the success of the organization. **Also known as the 80/20 rule, the Pareto Principle suggests that roughly 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes.** In business, 80% of sales come from 20% of clients. Roughly 20% of the practice techniques of athletes have 80% of the impact on athletic performance. Less than 20% of the possible causes of accidental deaths account for more than 80% of actual accidental deaths. In other words, **by focusing on the most important 20% of anything, the positive results will be exponentially large.**ⁱⁱ

We all want to be happy, healthy, and less stressed. The key, however, is to care less about the 80% of things that really do *not* matter and care more about only what *is* truly and immediately important. What are the important things you should focus on? Well, that depends on who you are, as each of us has a different life, different goals, and different values. It is likely the 20% that matters most to you is not material wealth. As more than a quarter of Americans have reported 2020 has significantly impacted their income or left them unemployed, the fact that you have a job right now puts you in a better place than a lot of Americans.ⁱⁱⁱ You may not be rich, but you and your family are likely more financially secure than millions of Americans at the present moment. Besides, if you wanted to be rich, you wouldn't have chosen a career in public safety. So what should we be focusing on besides material wealth?

What Matters Most?

Answer this question: *If you were to leave this world today, what things would you regret not having done more of?* We should count our blessings regarding the material assets we currently have, but I imagine most of us would not regret that we didn't accumulate more stuff. My guess is that most of our regrets would be about our relationships. We would likely regret not having spent more time with family or friends, not having made a greater impact on the world, not having had more true friendships, or not having had more fulfilling experiences.

The things that came to mind when you answered the question above represent the 20% you need to focus on to improve your life by 80%. The things that did not come to mind when you answered this question are the 80% of stuff you need to stop worrying about.

Now, in pursuing that 20% that matters most, there will be sacrifices. I won't sugarcoat it—everything worthwhile in life is achieved by hard work and sacrifice. There are always trade-offs. Investing in family may cost you some career advancement opportunities or financial opportunities that overtime and off-duty work can offer you. But if family is what is most important to you (part of your 20%), then the trade-off is worth it for your mental health as long as you are willing to let go of the other stuff that does not matter as much (your 80%) such as more money or a specialty assignment. If one of your personal goals is not being so angry all of the time, and to laugh more, then you will need to sacrifice caring about what other people say about you. You will need to no longer care what your boss, or protestors, or politicians say or think about you. Do you really value their opinions anyway? Let them criticize you while at the same time they give you a paycheck, paid vacation, health insurance coverage, and contribute to your retirement pension.

You need to specifically define your personal goals and values in life. Come up with a list of no more than five specific life goals. One may be spend more time with your kids. One may be have a better marriage with your spouse. One may be to leave people better than how I found them while at work. One may be to laugh more and not be so angry all of the time. But remember, no more than five—the most important five things you can think of. Write them down. Think about them and meditate on them. Then, focus on those goals to the exclusion of the less important things that can keep us so busy—and so angry.

Become comfortable with caring only about these goals. Everything else takes a back seat. You must first care about these five things more than you care about all the adversity you have faced in 2020. Whether you like it or not, you are always choosing what to care

about. The key is to place the things you should not care about in the background, where they belong.

You can't please everyone. This inescapable fact was painfully apparent for public safety professionals in 2020. So, focus only on doing what your moral compass tells you is important. Extricating that crash victim from the mangled car. Put out the arson of the abandoned house so it doesn't spread to the homes of the innocent neighbors. Calm the argument (not fix the family) so that the neighbors can go back to sleep for the night.

If a city council is listening to calls to defund the police, will that impact your five important goals? If you have seniority and will keep your job, will the decisions by city council impact how you relate to your kids or your spouse? Only if you let it. If you do, you probably have slipped back into caring about these things *more* than your core 20% of concerns—your five life goals. Sure, decisions by city council may make it harder for your agency to provide good quality policing services to the community, but the voters have a say in who their leaders are. If this is what they want, then people have to get the level of services they are willing to implement. If city councils' cuts will cost you your job, rest assured that the hiring problems law enforcement has faced for the last several years means that there are many agencies looking for mature and experienced officers like you to fill their ranks—likely in communities that appreciate their police. **You risk your physical safety daily at work for your community—don't let politicians or professional protestors take your mental well-being and your off time as well.**

Always Asking Yourself: Just How Important is This?

Focusing on the most important and meaningful things in your life is the most productive use of your time and energy. The world has too many problems to focus on most of it—especially the things over which you have little control. Focusing only on the true meaning in your life will help you keep going and help you to bypass the other problems in life. The key to resiliency is not caring about so many things and focusing only on the things that align with your personal values—the things that really matter.

About the Author

Harry P. Dolan is a 32-year police veteran who served as a Chief of Police since 1987. As one of the nation's most experienced police chiefs, he brings 25 years of public safety executive experience to Dolan Consulting Group. He retired in October 2012 as Chief of Police of the Raleigh (N.C.) Police Department, an agency comprised of nearly 900 employees in America's 42nd largest city.

Chief Dolan began his law enforcement career in 1980 as a deputy sheriff in Asheville, North Carolina and served there until early 1982, when he joined the Raleigh Police Department, where he served as a patrol officer. In 1987, he was appointed Chief of Police for the N.C. Department of Human Resources Police Department, located in Black Mountain. He served as Chief of Police in Lumberton, N.C. from 1992 until 1998, when he became Chief of Police of the Grand Rapids, Michigan Police Department. He served in that capacity for nearly ten years before becoming Chief of the Raleigh Police Department in September 2007. As Chief, he raised the bar at every organization and left each in a better position to both achieve and sustain success.

Harry Dolan has lectured throughout the United States and has trained thousands of public safety professionals in the fields of Leadership & Management, Communications Skills, and Community Policing. Past participants have consistently described Chief Dolan's presentations as career changing, characterized by his sense of humor and unique ability to maintain participants' interest throughout his training sessions. Chief Dolan's demonstrated ability to connect with his clientele and deliver insightful instruction all with uncompromising principles will be of tremendous value in the private sector.

Chief Dolan's unbridled passion to achieve service-excellence is a driving force behind Dolan Consulting Group. He is a graduate of Western Carolina University and holds a Master's Degree in Organizational Leadership and Management from the University of North Carolina at Pembroke.

His training courses include:

[Verbal De-escalation Training: Surviving Verbal Conflict®](#)

[Verbal De-escalation Train The Trainer Program: Surviving Verbal Conflict®](#)

[Community Policing Training](#)

[Taking the Lead: Courageous Leadership for Today's Public Safety](#)

[Street Sergeant®: Evidence-Based First-Line Supervision Training.](#)

ⁱ American Psychological Association (2020). *Stress in America™ 2020: A National Mental Health Crisis*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

ⁱⁱ Koch, R. (2001). *The 80/20 Principle: The Secret of Achieving More with Less*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing; Koch, R. (2004). *Living the 80/20 Way: Work Less, Worry Less, Succeed More, Enjoy More*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2020). *The Employment Situation – October 2020*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor.