Some dreams come true. From a young age Joe wanted to be an officer, just like his Uncle Chris. This dream guided him through school and the training and probation period. But Joe, the oldest of six, always wanted to be a dad, too. This dream came true eight years ago. Today he feels that sometimes his two worlds collide. Like most of his fellow officers, he struggles with doing justice to both worlds.

Sometimes the way we are expected to be at work is not acceptable at home. Those whose jobs require strong leadership and independent decisions may find it especially difficult to switch to a softer, gentler style in personal life. Those in corrections, law enforcement or the military often struggle with this especially when problems or conflicts arise.

What’s in your tool box?

What tools do you carry around with you to respond to everyday problems and crises that arise in your life? Most of us have a few tried and true strategies we use over and over again when problems arise. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don’t. Hmmm?

Does our success, or lack of success, have something to do with which tool we’re using?

When we boil it down, we usually have two options. We can “fix” the problem, or we can “fix ourselves,” that is change our attitude about or approach to the problem.

There’s some debate about just when the “Serenity Prayer” was first written, but we do know the US Army and USO were distributing it to GI’s during WWII, and various 12-step programs have been using it since the 1940’s.

Serenity Prayer
Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

There is some wisdom to this. The idea is to assess the stressful situation… is there a problem that you can fix? If yes, fix it. If no, do the hard work to fix yourself with respect to the problem. Don’t let the stressor eat you alive.
Let’s take a look at Joe and some of the things going on in his life. Joe’s young son, Pete, recently tried out for a privately run basketball team. His best friend made the team, Pete didn’t.

Joe’s beside himself with disappointment and anger that his kid didn’t make the team. All kinds of things are running through his head, like: “they only accepted the rich kids, I should have volunteered last year to coach his park district team, they think he’s too short, we got the application fee in late,” and on and on.

So, that’s one of the things going on at home that’s occupying Joe’s mind. At work, it’s something else. Finally Joe’s got a partner who thinks like he does. The two get along great and have become a successful team. Now their sergeant is splitting them up and pairing Joe with someone no one gets along with, including Joe. Is Joe being punished? No, just the opposite. The sergeant thinks so highly of Joe that he feels Joe will have a good influence on the guy.

So what are some of the tools that Joe can use?

### Fix the Problem

Some persons focus on the situation that is causing stress. This is also referred to as a ‘problem-focused coping style.’ They immediately begin action to change or manage the situation that is causing stress. Problems are seen as a challenge and these people are ready to move forward.

The problem solving style is associated with low job stress in many groups of people. Prevention techniques are more often used and the stress is not as likely to escalate or to recur. HOWEVER, a recent study of police officers found this style to be the most common BUT this technique/style/set of strategies is counter productive for officers in many situations.

Many officers are natural “fixers” while many of the problems they encounter everyday can not be fixed. So, they respond to a domestic call… they take away Mr. Wife Beater- is the problem fixed? Unlikely. They clean up a horrible accident scene, write the report- is the problem fixed? Unlikely. Moving violation, stolen property, we could go on and on- are any of these problems likely to be truly “fixed” by Officer X?

So what is the answer when a problem can’t be fixed?

### Fix Yourself

In a situation where you cannot control the problem or its outcome, you are better off to work on yourself. Some people call this the “emotion-focused” coping style. This strategy is associated with the lowest stress among officers whereas the “fix the problem” strategy has been linked to higher stress among officers.
What does the “work on yourself” approach look like? When you use this strategy, you turn your attention from the problem to how you are thinking or feelings about the problem. Some people use humor to minimize the stressor (making fun of something that is bothering you or poking some fun at yourself for being upset or rigid about it). Others “reframe” the problem, looking for the best case scenario or the little bit of light that comes through every dark cloud. People who use this strategy are also a little better at seeking support to help manage feelings about a problem they can’t fix.

Communicate and Negotiate
Positive communication makes negotiations smoother when you are faced with too much to do or when work and personal relationships are in conflict. When disagreeing with someone, review these positive communication skills before you begin discussion:

- **Respond** rather than **react** to the other’s point of view. Reacting is behaving without thinking rather than behaving based on careful consideration. You don’t have to do as the other person wishes, but understand that their opinion may have some value.

- Discuss the situation to fully understand one another’s point of view. Stick with common interests rather than focusing on differences.

- Brainstorm alternatives that might work and choose one that benefits everyone.

- Keep a positive attitude.

The Way of Life
Things are never smooth all the time, for anyone. Officer Joe’s life is likely to occasionally present him with conflicts and problems that require strategy, flexibility, and some negotiation. Sometimes, he is likely to come against a problem that he cannot fix no matter how honed the tools in his box.

In these cases, Joe can learn to work on himself and seek support from those around him. When officers are able to do this, their work-life stress levels go down. Try it!

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