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Faith and Purpose: When the Mission Changes

Prepared by Dave Balsamo
Veteran | Retired Law Enforcement | Founder of Tactical Reset

The Situation

For many first responders and service members, purpose begins with the mission. You protect people, solve problems, lead teams, respond to emergencies, and complete work that matters. The role provides structure, responsibility, and a clear answer when someone asks what you do.

…Then the mission changes.

Retirement, medical separation, injury, reassignment, family changes, or the loss of a position can remove the purpose that influenced your daily routine: the uniform is put away, the phone stops ringing, and your previous agency/organization moves forward. You are done, and nobody gives you a briefing packet explaining what to do next.

I've been there, done that, and it isn't fun! After nearly three decades of reserve military service and 25 years in law enforcement, I understand how professional identity defines your purpose. My days used to be determined by investigations, assignments, deadlines, deployments, and leading others. There was always another task to carry out and another problem requiring an answer – and I loved it!

Unfortunately, my professional identity and purpose came to a screeching halt when I had a widowmaker heart attack. While dealing with the medical complications, I also had to contend with my identity and purpose being thrown out the window. It wasn't fair; none of this was planned for, I didn't get a vote, and worst of all, I couldn't control any of it. The sharp reality sank in that I could no longer define my value through my badge, rank, or position. I was no longer in the game, and trust me it stung!

This day will come for every single one of you. Hopefully not a heart attack but you will have to retire step away no longer wear the uniform or carry the badge. Why is it that we spend so much of our lives getting ready for the job yet we spend so little time preparing for the day the job is over. We know how to manage dangerous situations, chaos and how to get other people through their worst day. But when are identity shifts and our purpose is no more we are totally lost.

What I want you to understand is that losing your professional identity doesn't mean you've lost your sense of purpose. Instead, you need to see it as a blessing that you have an opportunity to create a new purpose that is totally 100% you and not tied to any agency or organization.

The Impact

When you finally have to put away the badge or the uniform, it causes a disturbance that will affect your relationships, your motivation, your spiritual well-being, and your emotional stability. After all, you are a person who led others and who made critical decisions, so it's understandable that when that is no more, you will feel unnecessary, unwanted, or defective.

The seriousness of hopelessness and disconnection from identity and purpose should not be underestimated. The Department of Veterans Affairs reported 6,398 cases of veteran suicides in 2023, which amounts to an average of 17.5 deaths per day. Suicide was also the second leading cause of death among veterans under the age of 45 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2025). While this research focused on veterans, I think it's easy for us to also relate these findings to those who previously served in public safety positions

Lessons Learned

Well, one thing we have learned is that losing identity and purpose has measurable psychological consequences for public safety professionals. A two-year study of 393 firefighters found that a lower sense of meaning in life predicted increases in depression symptoms, even after researchers accounted for the firefighters' symptoms at the beginning of the study. The researchers concluded that strengthening meaning in life should become part of efforts to prevent depression among firefighters and other first responders (Lommen, 2024). This study definitely shows that purpose is connected to the psychological health of those who made a career out of repeatedly serving others.

So, what about the connection between loss of purpose and physical health? A meta-analysis of 10 studies involving 136,265 people found that those with a higher sense of purpose had a 17 percent lower adjusted risk of death from any cause and a 17 percent lower adjusted risk of cardiovascular events (Cohen et al., 2016). Losing purpose does not directly cause a psychological or physical breakdown, but it may contribute to isolation, unhealthy coping habits, poor self-care, chronic stress, and declining health. This evidence reminds us that finding a new mission (AKA Purpose) after retirement, injury, or separation is more than a motivational goal. It is part of protecting your mental, physical, and spiritual health.

In the end, having purpose is important, but we have to shift that purpose from being solely derived from our profession.

Corrective Actions

You can start by writing a single sentence that outlines your personal mission statement, specifying who you want to serve, what you want to provide, and to explain why it is important. As an example, my statement reads something like, "My aim is to make use of my experience to help first responders and veterans strengthen their faith, families, and mental health."

Identify three parts of your former role that gave you that purpose. Perhaps you valued leadership, teamwork, problem solving, service, protection, teaching, or belonging. Find a new activity that expresses each quality. If you miss leading, mentor someone - If you miss teamwork, join a service group - If you miss protecting others, teach what experience taught you.

A must is that you also build structure into your week. Make sure you schedule exercise, worship, family time, service, rest, and meaningful work.Too much empty time leaves room for isolation and unhealthy habits. After all, you spent years following a set routine, and your next season of life deserves one too.

Finally, tell someone when you feel lost. Speak with your spouse, friend, pastor, chaplain, peer support member, or counselor. Finding a new purpose often develops through honest conversations rather than suffering in silence.

Faith Perspective

Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works." Our identity is grounded in Christ, and our purpose includes the good works God prepared for us. We do not earn our worth through a title, position, or accomplishment. Our main purpose is to serve, and we serve because we belong to Christ.

In other words, a badge, uniform, rank, career, or physical ability will definitely change, but God's ownership and calling do not have an expiration date like retirement, an injury, or when life takes an unexpected direction. The mission may look different, but opportunities to serve remain.

Faith also gives purpose beyond productivity, while some seasons involve leading and building. Other seasons can involve healing, waiting, learning, or allowing others to help us. Taking time to Tactically Reset and rest does not mean God has finished with us. Your former role described what

you did, but your faith explains who you are.

Finally, I'd like to emphasize the importance of finding a faith-based community. A study kept under observation 66,492 female nurses and 43,141 male health professionals; those who attended religious services weekly had a 68 percent lower risk of dying. related to drugs, alcohol, or suicide among women and a 33 percent lower risk among men when compared with those who never attended services (Chen et al., 2020). To be clear, this study does not prove church attendance prevents these things, but it highlights the value of faith, connection, shared meaning, and community support.

Resources

If you feel disconnected, hopeless, or unsure of your next step, speak with a licensed mental health professional, pastor, chaplain, peer support member, or trusted friend. You do not need to wait until your situation becomes a crisis.

Call or text 988 for free, confidential crisis support. Veterans, service members, National Guard members, Reserve members, and their loved ones should call 988 and press 1 or text 838255. Current and former law enforcement officers may contact COPLINE at 1 800 267 5463 for confidential support from trained retired officers.

For questions, education, or support resources, contact Tactical Reset at info@tacticalreset.org.

The mission changed. Your purpose did not end.

Sources

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