

PW-WEB-CHAPLOG-005

PRESENCE WORKS LLC™

Healing Begins with Presence™

Trauma-Responsive Encounters

Chaplain's Log: Public Safety Edition

Real and illustrative field encounters exploring how PRESENCE™ and ATTUNE™ guide compassionate, ethical, consent-based care across fire, EMS, law enforcement, communications, emergency management, and chaplaincy.

The Chaplain's Log: Public Safety Edition is a collection of field-style teaching encounters. Some are adapted from ministry across public safety, and others are composite illustrations built in the same spirit, written to show what trauma-responsive presence looks like among the people behind fire, EMS, law enforcement, 911 communications, emergency management, hospital response, and chaplaincy. Each entry follows a real or realistic moment: a supervisor who took care of everyone but himself, a telecommunicator who heard an incident unfold but never saw it, a responder whose difficult week followed him home. These aren't polished success stories. They're honest snapshots of what it looks like to slow down, notice, and stay present when the people who show up for everyone else are struggling themselves.

For our students, the purpose isn't to hand you a script. It's to show PRESENCE™ and ATTUNE™ at work in situations too complicated for a textbook to fully capture, across every uniform and role that makes up public safety. Each case walks through the situation, the challenge, the response, and then breaks down exactly which movements of PRESENCE™ and ATTUNE™ were in play and why they mattered.

Read these not as a set of rules to memorize, but as a way of training your instincts so that when you're the one sitting with a partner in crisis, you already recognize the shape of what presence can offer.

01 “Nobody's Asked Me That”

THE SITUATION

A major incident brought fire, EMS, law enforcement, communications, emergency management, and hospital personnel together. For hours, a public safety supervisor coordinated personnel, answered questions, checked on crews, talked with families, and made sure everyone had what they needed. Several days later, the chaplain found him sitting alone.

THE CHALLENGE

His instinct, even in a private conversation, was to redirect concern back onto his people. I needed to ask about him specifically, without accepting a deflection as the whole answer.

THE TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE RESPONSE

The chaplain asked how he was doing. The supervisor said his people were the ones he was worried about. The chaplain said he knew that, but he was asking about him specifically. The supervisor grew quiet and finally said nobody had asked him that. The chaplain didn't offer advice right away. He pulled up a chair and said, “Then let's start there.”

PRESENCE™ in Practice

- **Pause & Prepare:** The chaplain resisted moving immediately into problem solving.
- **Regulate Self:** He brought a calm, unhurried presence into the conversation.
- **Engage Humanly:** He saw the person underneath the rank and responsibility.

- **See & Sense Cues:** He noticed exhaustion, isolation, and the tendency to redirect attention toward everyone else.
- **Empower Choice:** The supervisor was allowed to decide what he was ready to discuss.
- **Normalize Responses:** The chaplain reminded him that being affected by a difficult incident doesn't diminish his leadership.
- **Connect Early:** Peer, chaplaincy, family, and organizational support were identified as options.
- **Encourage Next Steps:** They began building a plan for his own recovery, not just the workforce's.

ATTUNE™ in Practice

- **Attune to State:** Responsibility had been hiding real exhaustion.
- **Track Stress Impact:** The conversation explored sleep, relationships, irritability, concentration, and the burden of decision making.
- **Titrate Intensity:** The chaplain didn't ask him to unpack the entire incident at once.
- **Understand Meaning:** His leadership identity was tied to the belief that his job was to take care of everybody else.
- **Name Strengths:** His concern for his people was named as a genuine strength.
- **Equip Next Steps:** The chaplain helped him extend some of that same concern toward himself.

WHY THIS APPROACH HELPED

The person checking on everybody else may be the person nobody remembers to check on.

WEBSITE TEACHING POINTS

- Asking "how are you" a second time, after a deflection, often gets past the first answer.
- Leaders can hide exhaustion behind responsibility for others.
- Recovery plans should include the leader, not just the people they lead.

TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT *Who supports the leader after the leader has supported everyone else?*

02 "I Wasn't Even on Scene"

THE SITUATION

Following a devastating incident, responders who were physically present received peer support and chaplain follow up. A communications specialist quietly told the chaplain she knew she wasn't there and shouldn't be this bothered.

THE CHALLENGE

Telecommunicators are easy to overlook in post incident support because they weren't physically present. I needed to recognize that hearing an incident unfold can carry its own weight.

THE TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE RESPONSE

The chaplain asked what she heard. She paused and said, “Everything.” The initial call, the frightened voice, responders arriving, radio traffic changing as the seriousness became clear, the request for additional units, then silence. She said she couldn’t see anything, she just had to sit there listening and keep doing her job. The chaplain responded that not being physically there didn’t mean she wasn’t part of what happened.

PRESENCE™ in Practice

- **Pause & Prepare:** The chaplain didn’t compare her experience with field personnel before hearing her out.
- **Regulate Self:** He listened without reacting dramatically to the details she described.
- **Engage Humanly:** He recognized the telecommunicator as part of the response system, not a bystander.
- **See & Sense Cues:** He noticed her guilt about even having a reaction.
- **Empower Choice:** She was allowed to share as much or as little as she wanted.
- **Normalize Responses:** He explained simply that hearing frightening events unfold can affect people too.
- **Connect Early:** Communications personnel were included in the same support resources as field staff.
- **Encourage Next Steps:** He encouraged rest, connection, peer support, and follow up.

ATTUNE™ in Practice

- **Attune to State:** He listened for both distress and self dismissal in what she said.
- **Track Stress Impact:** He asked how the incident had affected her sleep, concentration, thoughts, and return to the console.
- **Titrate Intensity:** He avoided asking her to replay the entire call in detail.
- **Understand Meaning:** Helplessness was central for her. She could hear it but couldn’t physically help.
- **Name Strengths:** She stayed professional and helped coordinate the response while hearing something difficult.
- **Equip Next Steps:** He made sure she knew support was available for communications personnel too.

WHY THIS APPROACH HELPED

Trauma does not require physical proximity. Sometimes a voice through a headset is enough.

WEBSITE TEACHING POINTS

- Telecommunicators are part of the response, not observers of it.
- Guilt about having a reaction is itself worth naming and addressing.
- Support resources should explicitly include communications personnel.

TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT *Who in your organization may be affected by critical incidents even though they never crossed the scene tape?*

03 “I Don’t Want to Bring This Home”

THE SITUATION

A firefighter, medic, officer, dispatcher, or other public safety professional finished a difficult week. At work everything seemed manageable, but at home little things began causing unusually strong reactions. The television was too loud, the children were arguing, someone asked a simple question, and the responder snapped.

THE CHALLENGE

The reaction at home looked disproportionate to what triggered it, and it would have been easy to treat it as a home problem rather than a carryover from work. I needed to help the responder see the actual source without shaming the behavior.

THE TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE RESPONSE

Sitting alone afterward, the responder said they didn’t understand it, they weren’t angry at their family. A peer supporter said maybe the anger didn’t start at home. After a silence, the responder said they just didn’t want their family paying for what they see at work. The peer supporter said maybe they could figure out how to help leave more of the shift at the station.

PRESENCE™ in Practice

- **Pause & Prepare:** The peer supporter didn’t rush to correct the behavior before understanding it.
- **Regulate Self:** A steady, non judgmental tone kept the conversation from feeling like an accusation.
- **Engage Humanly:** The question “what’s been going on” was asked instead of “what’s wrong with you.”
- **See & Sense Cues:** The mismatch between a manageable shift and an outsized reaction at home was read as the real signal.
- **Empower Choice:** The responder was left to name the connection between work and home themselves.
- **Normalize Responses:** The reaction was treated as understandable carryover, not a character flaw.
- **Connect Early:** The conversation opened the door to talking about transition practices between shift and home.
- **Encourage Next Steps:** They began identifying a concrete plan for leaving more of the shift at the station.

ATTUNE™ in Practice

- **Attune to State:** The snapping at small things signaled leftover activation from work, not a home problem.
- **Track Stress Impact:** The conversation traced how a difficult week at work was surfacing in an unrelated setting.
- **Titrate Intensity:** The peer supporter offered one reframe, “maybe the anger didn’t start at home,” rather than a full analysis.
- **Understand Meaning:** “I don’t want my family paying for what I see at work” named exactly what the responder was afraid of.
- **Name Strengths:** The responder’s own concern for protecting their family showed real self awareness.
- **Equip Next Steps:** Naming the gap between on duty and walking through the door pointed toward specific transition practices to try.

WHY THIS APPROACH HELPED

Families sometimes experience the consequences of public safety stress without ever seeing the incidents that produced it. Supporting the responder can therefore support the family too.

WEBSITE TEACHING POINTS

- Ask “what’s been going on” instead of “what’s wrong with you.”
- A reaction that seems disproportionate at home may be carryover from work.
- Concrete transition practices, such as quiet time, a shower, exercise, music, prayer, brief grounding, talking with a trusted person, or sitting in the driveway for a few minutes, can help mark the shift as over.

TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT *What tells your mind and body the shift is over and you’re home now?*

04 “I Hate Feeling Helpless”

THE SITUATION

Public safety professionals are trained to act: secure the scene, stop the threat, put out the fire, treat the patient, send the resources, solve the problem. But occasionally every available resource is used and the outcome still cannot be changed. After one such incident, a responder told the chaplain he kept thinking there had to be something else they could have done.

THE CHALLENGE

The instinct was to reassure him that he’d done everything right. I needed to recognize that the real question underneath wasn’t about procedure.

THE TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE RESPONSE

The chaplain didn’t immediately say there was nothing more he could have done. Instead he said it sounded like he was carrying a lot from that call. The responder nodded and said he hated feeling helpless. That word changed the conversation.

PRESENCE™ in Practice

- **Pause & Prepare:** The chaplain stayed with the responder before offering any reassurance.
- **Regulate Self:** A steady, unhurried tone let the word helpless surface on its own.
- **Engage Humanly:** “That was hard” was offered before any conclusion about procedure.
- **See & Sense Cues:** The repeated “what else could we have done” was read as unresolved helplessness, not a procedural question.
- **Empower Choice:** The responder was allowed to name what was actually bothering him.

- **Normalize Responses:** Feeling helpless after doing everything possible was treated as understandable, not a failure.
- **Connect Early:** The conversation stayed open for further follow up rather than closing with a single reassurance.
- **Encourage Next Steps:** Naming helplessness directly gave the chaplain a clearer sense of what kind of support would actually help.

ATTUNE™ in Practice

- **Attune to State:** The responder's repeated review of the call signaled something deeper than a procedural question.
- **Track Stress Impact:** Competence had not translated into control over the outcome, and that gap was the real source of distress.
- **Titrate Intensity:** The chaplain offered one reflective statement rather than a full explanation of what had happened.
- **Understand Meaning:** The real question wasn't "did I follow protocol," it was "how do I live with not being able to save someone."
- **Name Strengths:** The responder's drive to help, even when it couldn't change the outcome, reflected exactly why he'd entered the profession.
- **Equip Next Steps:** Recognizing the true question let follow up conversations focus on helplessness rather than procedure review.

WHY THIS APPROACH HELPED

One of the hardest realities of public safety is learning that competence does not guarantee control over outcomes. Presence allows people to wrestle with that reality without wrestling with it alone.

WEBSITE TEACHING POINTS

- "That was hard" can be more helpful initially than "there was nothing you could have done."
- Listen for the question underneath the question.
- Competence and control over outcomes are not the same thing, and responders may need help separating them.

TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT *Can we accompany someone through helplessness without rushing to make the feeling disappear?*

05 "You Came Back"

THE SITUATION

After a major incident, support poured into the agency. Food arrived, peer support teams checked in, chaplains visited, leadership sent messages, and neighboring agencies offered assistance. Then the days passed. The apparatus returned to service, the patrol cars returned to the road, the ambulances answered

calls, the dispatch consoles remained staffed, and the emergency operations center closed. Life appeared to return to normal.

THE CHALLENGE

The visible support had a natural end point, but that didn't mean the need for support had ended too. I needed to return without a specific reason, simply because time had passed.

THE TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE RESPONSE

Three weeks later, the chaplain walked into the station. One responder looked surprised and asked what he was doing there. He said he was checking on them. The responder smiled and said, "You came back."

PRESENCE™ in Practice

- **Pause & Prepare:** The chaplain planned the return visit well after the initial wave of support had ended.
- **Regulate Self:** The visit was low key, without any special announcement or agenda.
- **Engage Humanly:** "Checking on you guys" kept the visit personal rather than procedural.
- **See & Sense Cues:** The responder's surprise itself signaled that follow up this far out wasn't expected.
- **Empower Choice:** No one was required to talk. The visit itself was the support.
- **Normalize Responses:** Different responders were allowed to process on their own timelines, from immediate to weeks later to not wanting a long conversation at all.
- **Connect Early:** The return visit reopened a connection that the initial response alone couldn't sustain.
- **Encourage Next Steps:** The visit signaled that future check ins would continue, not just a one time gesture.

ATTUNE™ in Practice

- **Attune to State:** The responder's surprised reaction showed how rare unprompted follow up actually is.
- **Track Stress Impact:** Three weeks out, initial support had faded even though the impact of the incident likely hadn't.
- **Titrate Intensity:** The chaplain didn't press for a debrief. He simply reappeared.
- **Understand Meaning:** "You came back" carried the real message, that someone remembered without being asked.
- **Name Strengths:** The responder's willingness to voice his surprise, and his smile, reflected genuine appreciation rather than discomfort.
- **Equip Next Steps:** The visit itself became the equipping, reestablishing that support was still available weeks later.

WHY THIS APPROACH HELPED

The first response says we're here because something happened. Follow up says we're here because you matter. That distinction is at the heart of trauma responsive public safety.

WEBSITE TEACHING POINTS

- Support that ends when the immediate response ends leaves a gap that unprompted follow up can fill.
- People process difficult experiences on very different timelines, from days to weeks to never wanting to talk at length.

- A simple, unannounced return visit can communicate more than a scheduled debrief.

TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT *Instead of ending every conversation with “call me if you need anything,” what would happen if we simply came back?*

A NOTE ON THESE STORIES

These stories are fictional and composite illustrations built to teach trauma-responsive principles across public safety. They do not provide medical, psychological, or legal advice. Supportive practices should be used with informed consent, within the practitioner's training and scope, and alongside appropriate emergency, medical, behavioral health, supervisory, or spiritual-care resources when indicated.

HEALING BEGINS WITH PRESENCE™