

Anxiety, Stress, politics, and "The Pendulum"

Getting and Giving "The Pendulum Speech"

If you start complaining about changes in law enforcement or express displeasure about the politics that drive current agency policy near a seasoned veteran, GET READY you'll likely hear the "Pendulum Speech." Many have heard it or even given it themselves.

For those who haven't, "The Pendulum" is a bit of wisdom that describes public sentiment and how the public and politicians perceive our job function. It swings between anarchy and absolute freedom on one side, and strict totalitarian order on the other. The point is, the pendulum is always in motion. If you like how things are, bad news: change is coming. If you don't, good news: it'll swing your way soon. Every seasoned LEO knows about "The Pendulum". In our culture, it's one of the things that is learned through experience and passed down through the generations.

What drives the pendulum's motion? Two things: momentum and gravity. Momentum is when things are going well, people are comfortable and happy. Gravity represents problems, suffering, and negative impacts.

How The Pendulum Works

In general (at times when things are going well), Americans don't want to be told what to do, we don't like rules, we hate limitations on our freedom. Americans will fight for more freedom and politicians generally bend to public pressure. Cause and effect. Laws become too permissive, police powers are limited, officers are discouraged from making arrests. Defunding happens. Then criminals are emboldened, crime escalates, citizens get hurt, and safety declines. "The Pendulum" swings. The negatives start to outweigh the positives. Citizens demand justice, order, security, and safety. Politicians respond, laws become strict, policies rigid. Arrests are encouraged, prosecutions increase. You can't walk the streets without a cop questioning you. Eventually, people forget the past and start complaining about overbearing authorities. They don't want to be told what to do, and politicians bend again. Tick-tock, the pendulum swings, the cycle continues. This is just how things go, it is what it is. This is the bit of old cop wisdom we share with rookies, but we don't own the concept, it's been around for a long time:

“Time is a sort of river of passing events, and strong is its current; no sooner is a thing brought to sight than it is swept by and another takes its place, and this too will be swept away.”

—Marcus Aurelius

What Do I Do?

As a working LEO, this cycle is beyond your control. You can do what's right on an individual basis, but nothing you say or do will change the cycle. Nobody can stop the pendulum, and you don't want to. Stopping change, means stagnation lack of innovation, and limits opportunities for growth and improvement. For your mental health, understand that it will swing eventually. Don't base your happiness on where “The Pendulum” currently is. Don't cling to rigid ideas about where it should be and waste time complaining when it's not there. If this sounds like you, good news: you can let it go and discard beliefs that make you miserable (at least half the time):

“Today I escaped from anxiety. Or no, I discarded it, because it was within me, in my own perceptions; not outside.”

—Marcus Aurelius

“You don't have to turn this into something. It doesn't have to upset you.”

—Marcus Aurelius

“There are more things ... likely to frighten us than there are to crush us; we suffer more often in imagination than in reality.”

—Seneca

No matter how things are going or how things go in the future, I'd like for you to have the tools and tactics of philosophy close at hand. Whatever you do, don't let “The Pendulum” carry you away.

Amor Fati

Sgt. Steve

