

LIFELINE

By

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*Lifeline is based on the author's memories. Some
names and identifying details have been changed to
protect the privacy of individuals.*

*Certain incidents may have been combined or
compressed for narrative purposes.*

Dedication

For Jay and our beautiful children.

*Your love has pulled me back from the edge and gives
my life purpose.*

This book is for you.

Gratitude

Thank you to my wife, you are my constant, my rock. You saw the worst of me and chose to stay.

Thank you to our children; your patience, love and unwavering presence gave me purpose when I had none. You gave me something to hold on to when I was falling. You gave me a reason to live.

Thank you to my mother, you are the heart of our family. You held me together when I was falling apart.

Thank you to my father for always believing in me, even when I couldn't believe in myself.

To my twin brother, who walks his own path with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), you are not alone. We share the same blood, and now, the same battle.

To those silently suffering, who don't yet realise they're hurting, or why they are triggering, be kind to yourself.

There is no shame in pain and no weakness in needing help.

Know that there is nothing wrong in asking for help; it's brave beyond words. Asking for help is not giving up; it's choosing to fight a different way.

Believe in yourself, even when it feels impossible. Especially then.

The rest will follow...

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Foreword

Lifeline exists because I need to talk about the human side of being a Police Officer.

In early 2021, I first shared my story at an internal support group called the Men's Forum. Still adhering to lockdown rules, I'd connected with a number of serving Police Officers and police staff via Teams.

Once the support group ended, we would occasionally check in with one another, brought together by our openness to talk about and share our mental health struggles. It was after one of these sessions that one of the men said to me, 'Darren, I just can't accept feeling vulnerable.'

That morning, I'd been up early writing in my journal as I too was struggling with accepting and feeling vulnerable. I typed out the words I'd written in my journal a few hours earlier and emailed them over to him.

He later asked, ‘What book is this from? I want to buy it.’

I told him that those were my thoughts and my feelings, and that I wrote them down in my journal in order to help me navigate my own thought processes.

He replied, ‘You have to write a book.’

A seed was sown. I thought, *If I could help him, might I be able to help others? Could I be their lifeline?*

Feeling a new sense of purpose, I realised that I’d mindlessly fooled myself into thinking that I wasn’t broken, because I’d been ashamed for appearing weak and being affected by my job.

The support group had given me a much-needed platform to gradually accept my mental-health struggles and begin to talk more openly. For too long, I thought it was far easier not to remember and block out the trauma I’d seen as a Police Officer, to pretend it had never happened, like a nightmare to be forgotten.

Despite my attempts to block out the trauma, fear had wrapped its hands around my heart and showed me it *had* happened. What we see we cannot un-see, and I

cannot change how my mind responded to the threats, nor who I am.

I began the process of writing this book when I opened my dark-brown, leather, A5 journals one by one and read them all, marking with Post-it notes what I thought could be used.

When I write, like gravity, I feel lighter, more buoyant, and under less pressure. Writing has the power to free me from so much pain, and something deeper occurs. I'm fortunate to have found such a creative way to process my trauma. Having this outlet prevents me from bottling up every thought and slowly rotting me from the inside out, as I had done for so many years when I failed to ask for help and suppressed my feelings.

Each chapter took courage to write. But the writing has helped me to heal and consequently brought to the surface immense emotional feelings. One of those is fear; this process has allowed me to reflect, but it has also taken me back to a time in my life where I was paralysed with terror.

A stark reminder of my darkest moments.

As a Police Officer, you're in a privileged position in society that enables you to help others. Before joining the police service, I really didn't consider the daily demands, long hours, or the many incidents I'd attend and investigate. I was so focussed on helping others, I didn't consider my own needs and how being a Police Officer might affect me.

I set a number of intentions prior to joining the police in 2006, and during my career I'm proud to say that I achieved those goals. I've always tried my best for the victims of crime, my colleagues, and the teams I've been fortunate enough to work with and supervise.

In trying to help others, I didn't want to concede when trauma had struck my body. I didn't listen to it, and I didn't recognise the signs and symptoms that had built up over years of attending and investigating some of the most serious criminal offences.

In 2020, with 14 years' service under my belt, a brick wall appeared in front of me. I didn't know how to get around it, through it, or over it. I finally broke, and my nervous system shut down.

Each day, having constant panic attacks, I couldn't leave my house and lived in total fear. I was at crisis point. I've since been diagnosed with PTSD, which is defined by the NHS as *a mental health condition caused by very stressful, frightening, or distressing events*, from reviewing indecent images of children being abused.

On occasions, while writing *Lifeline*, I have been totally unable to move, sick, and overwhelmed by my anxiety. Some chapters took months to piece together, and every chapter triggered me as I'd see and relive the traumatic images again and again and again.

I expected this would happen, yet I chose to share my story. I had to write it.

You might ask, why would I put myself through this. The reality is that I was in constant pain with my PTSD – the book has helped me process some of that – and if the chapters that follow help you, then that pain has been worth the sacrifice.

Some chapters will be hard to read, especially for my loved ones and in years to come, my children. For

friends and former colleagues, this may be the first time you truly learn how dark and unbearable my life was.

Know this, I love you all, but I must be honest. I cannot hide it anymore and each one of you helped me through this time.

I hope my journey helps others to feel strong enough to ask for help sooner than I did. My masculinity often stood in the way, surrounding me in an armour of pride. But talking really does save lives.

I want to share my story to highlight that early intervention works to prevent significant illness and help families understand what trauma can do to a person if their loved one cannot talk about, or accept, their own struggles.

My hope, with the passing of time, is that more days will be filled with less fear, that we can get better and all live healthier, happier, and more present lives.

My wife, Jay, and my best friend supported me to get help; they were my lifeline. My hope is that this book could become yours, or who knows, you could become somebody else's.

When my thoughts were written down, they became something tangible that I could move, put a line through, tear out, throw away, or burn. For the months and years that followed, I had no plan to write daily; it simply kept on happening. Writing was a part of my day that I had control over. It was a time to escape, reflect, and be thankful, even during hard times.

In doing so, writing has helped me enormously through the process of my breakdowns, final surrender, and through the time I needed to heal.

I've taken another path full of hope and ambition to reduce the stigma of mental health in our society. By accepting my vulnerabilities, I now welcome my mental health with compassion and open arms.

Helping others continues to be my passion, in the same way it was when I served. How? By being honest, open, and by showing willing.

I hope the following inspires you as much as it has inspired me.

Introduction

I'm grateful to be alive and a survivor; not to have survived the dangers I faced as a Police Officer but the number of mental crisis points I have endured as a result of serving. The act of writing *Lifeline* kept me grounded. When all my pain is healed and my emotions are stabilised, I'll be able to look back and be reminded of how fragile life really is.

When I first joined the police, I never envisioned how helping others would change my life forever or how life would change in an instant for me. I try to remain positive that there are more good people than there are evil in our world, but when you have seen the dark shadows that lurk among us in our daily lives, remaining positive can be a challenge.

It was my duty to protect and serve. I was well-trained and equipped to attend any incident. From a stop and search to deploying covertly on operations, or to attend a murder scene or a terrorist incident.

There were many incidents I'd have been more than happy not to have seen, but it was my duty to respond. In November 2006, I swore an oath to protect and serve, and I meant every word. When I felt fear or panic attending some incidents, I was somehow able to remain calm because I had a job to do.

There are some crime scenes I didn't attend in the physical sense, as I'd later discover. With the increase in digital technology and easy access to images and videos of children, this has provided paedophiles with a platform to share the abuse of children throughout the world.

Every image, every video, is a crime scene with a poor child at the centre, who is a victim. I'd later attend these crime scenes from the comfort of my office in the police station, by opening a digital file and reviewing the crime scene and all the available evidence to try to save the child and prosecute the paedophiles.

Like the crime scenes you might see on television or in the movies, when the police are called to a significant incident, it's very visible for all to see. There are loud sirens, flashing lights, a police cordon with the word

Police written in blue on a white reel of tape, and Detectives like me managing the investigation.

Gathering evidence in crime scenes is often very slow and time-consuming because you must be rigorous. When the flashing lights and police cordons are lifted, and the Detectives leave the scene, any evidence or forensics not recovered are gone forever.

Online investigations may be hidden from the wider public but are still considered crime scenes, with Detectives risking their mental health on a daily basis trying to relentlessly locate where the image was taken, in order to protect the child and bring them to a place of safety. All while trying to successfully prosecute the paedophiles so they can never do it again.

When these horrendous crimes are committed, the paedophiles believe nobody is watching and what they do can be done with impunity, but the police, the National Crime Agency (NCA), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) work tirelessly to try to prevent this from happening.

Unlike crimes in action, which are attended to immediately by the police and evidence is secured,

digital images or video files – which are recorded and later opened and watched – are a new crime scene. A crime scene that can be revisited for eternity and not only once, in public view, for all to see.

In my duty to protect others and do what was right, I failed to protect myself, and I'd later be overpowered by the way these crimes were stored in my brain. How could they not have an impact on my mental health when they were so devastatingly gruesome and dark? They should never exist, but in the world we live in, they tragically do.

The compassion and advice I gave to hundreds of victims of crime to trust in the police would be advice I'd later find impossible to hear, or accept, from others for myself.

You cannot un-see what you have seen. There are crises in life and when this happened, I could no longer protect myself from harm. I needed somebody to become my lifeline, giving me the time to rest and decompress, to feel safe enough to stop fighting and allow others to lift me out of danger, as I have done for so many others.

An investigative mindset

I have over 16 years' service under my belt, and 14 of those years were primarily in Detective roles. I loved investigating crime, gathering all available information and evidence, looking for the missing pieces of the jigsaw. I'd always try to be objective and investigate without bias, something that was more challenging to put into practice. Over many years of working on highly pressurised, life-or-death cases, I began to trust in my investigative mindset. As a Detective, this becomes second nature. Like breathing, it just happens.

Later, when I was broken mentally, I wondered if I could use that mindset to my advantage. I have a lifetime of investigating some of the most complex and serious investigations and so I asked myself, *what if I applied the same methodology to investigating myself back to good health?*

In the same way that I'd successfully negotiated so many complex crimes, I began to research breakdowns, PTSD, the mind, cortisol, dopamine, medication, trauma, flashbacks, panic attacks, and anxiety.

I recorded what had helped others in my journals. Doing this was a great way to structure ideas, monitor my progress, and reflect on what worked or didn't work for me. I began to educate myself on the medication I was taking and why I had such severe side effects, such as nausea, sweating, dizziness, and feeling disoriented. More importantly, I began to research the mind and how to repair it. I found it too strenuous to read more than a paragraph or a page at a time, and exhausted, I'd often forget most of what I read. Because of my breakdown, my cognitive memory had been destroyed and many years on, it has yet to recover completely. It was like I was suffering from amnesia.

Making notes in my journals helped me to recall what I'd learnt, otherwise it would have been lost in the moment. I'd always use a bookmark so that the following day I'd know the pages I had read. Try as I might, I could not recall the day before. It was as if it had never existed.

I now realise this is why journalling every day became so fundamentally important for me. Completing a journal gave me a sense of control over

my memories and made me feel like I wasn't going insane. The process of writing essentially gave me hope and a future to look towards.

Slow-burning fire

Like a house that has caught fire, PTSD starts with a spark, using oxygen to grow and destroy all in its path. No one notices this slow-burning fire. There are no early warning signs and no prevention.

As a child, I remember an advert that showed a man, exhausted, who'd fallen asleep next to a Christmas tree. His cigarette had been left sitting unattended but still burning in an ashtray on an old, worn, brown sofa. Within seconds, the sofa had caught fire but with no smoke alarm installed in the house, the man continued to sleep soundly. By the end of the advert, it was obvious that he'd been killed by smoke or a raging fire.

Could this kind of public-health warning be an answer to the slow-burning fire of trauma inside so many people?

Is there a need for an advertising campaign to bring attention to the impending doom caused by PTSD in a

bid to save lives, just as this advert had attempted to do by raising awareness about the necessity of smoke alarms? After all, this was a campaign led by the government who have a duty of care to make people aware of such dangers and prevent the loss of life.

I wonder how supportive the government would be in bringing attention to the slow-burning fire of those suffering from PTSD, or potentially going to work in an environment where awareness of the consequences should be made more apparent? An advert could serve as an educational lifeline, making people more aware of this hidden trauma in order to change a culture and establish a world where we can all be more accepting of the idea that anyone can become affected by mental illness.

I strongly feel that awareness through education can help save lives and reduce the destruction caused to so many individuals and their families. Unfortunately, I believe it's unlikely that a government-backed campaign would happen, as it would show the negative impact and vulnerabilities of a sector that they want to encourage people to join.

I believe you can combine the two, promoting the need for good, determined individuals and teams of people working together for the benefit of others, but being mindful that sometimes it can come at a cost to your health. There is nothing wrong with highlighting this aspect and encouraging open dialogue in asking for help.

With the many shortcomings of available materials and awareness, and because of my own experiences, I feel it's my duty to share my story and fill this void. I want to create awareness and try to educate those who may suffer, including their family and friends. Without knowing them individually, I hope that my words and actions can reach these people, in a bid to become their lifeline.

Chapter 1: Who I Am

I am a man who almost certainly wants the same things as you. I am a man who tries his best.

A man who wants to be happy, healthy, and fulfilled.

I am a husband to my wife Jay, a father to my son and daughter, a son to my parents Marie and Tony, a brother to David, Ciaran, Neal, and Annette, an uncle to four nephews and six nieces, and a friend.

I am a man who wants to earn enough money to provide for my family and have the time to spend with them.

I want to feel like I have a purpose in life and that I'm making a difference in the world.

I want to feel pride, achievement, and belonging.

These are probably all things you also want. But the truth is that to live my best life in this moment, and every day to come, I have also endured the worst of life. I went from being a civilian to a Police Officer, then a Detective, then back to being a civilian.