

My Promise **By Steven Braun**

I'm a shift supervisor at an emergency 911 communications center, and that promise was my Facebook post on March 14, 2020, just three days after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic.

Less than a year before, my wife had been diagnosed with an immune disorder, and a couple of years before that, my mother had been diagnosed with dementia. She lived in assisted care, and I was one of her primary caregivers.

Under normal circumstances, my life was very stressful. COVID-19 blew that up. At work, we began dispatching more calls than ever, and policy seemed to change to meet the growing need almost daily.

My wife started working from home, and rarely left the house. I took care of everything that needed to occur outside of the house. I carried a small tote of disinfection materials, and cleaned everything, including myself before entering my home.

After a couple of staff exposures, all the residents in my mother's facility were placed in isolation...the very worst thing for dementia patients. I could only be in contact with her by phone. I could hear her condition beginning to deteriorate almost immediately. One night at work, my two workmates reported low grade fevers, *after* being in close contact with me. When I got home, I took my clothes off in the garage and threw them into the wash, then isolated from my wife for a week. But I continued to go out into the world and report to work. I kept fulfilling my promise. Until I couldn't.

On NYE, as 2020 came to an end, I stopped sleeping. I have a neurological disorder called restless leg syndrome that suddenly became unmanageable. For the next three and a half months I would get no more than three hours of sleep per day, usually much less. My endless waking hours were filled with home improvement projects and a burst of creative energy the likes of which I had never known, but then I had never had so much time to kill. The early morning hours between three and six were the worst. That's when my demons would come out and speak to me. It was a dangerous time, when the rest of the world was asleep, giving voice to my deepest fears and insecurities.

What if I never sleep again? I'm a burden to my wife. She's better off without me...

Sleep deprivation affects the brain and the body. I couldn't work or drive, so I was housebound, too. Now it was my wife's turn to take care of me. Through pain, anxiety, depression, and hallucinations – even a creative burst can turn into mania – she was by my side, holding me up, as we worked with a team of doctors to help me sleep again. Eventually, I did.

I learned that my medical condition had been affected by the extreme stress of my life over a period of 9-months, probably longer. I learned what happens when you don't take care of yourself, emotionally.

I'm back to work now and participate in a peer support group, sharing what I've learned, because there's a mental health crisis in the first responder community, and I want to be here to care for them.

But first, I must care for myself, and I will. That's my new promise.