

(Don't) Be a Jerk – Choosing Empathy Over Apathy

My last day as a general duties cop was October 3, 2015. I had actually timed it all really well; four weeks of recreation leave and a month of long service leave too. I had eight glorious weeks to rest and prepare for my new role in intel.

I went home and decided to go the gym. It was a hot day and this had a lot to do with what happened that afternoon. I think things would have been very different had it have been a little cooler.

I live quite close to the beach and every time we get a hot day, the streets around my house get really congested. It was for this reason that I decided to leave my car at home and run to the gym, which was only about two kilometres away.

I packed a lightweight backpack with a towel and a bottle full of water and set off from home. I was about three quarters of the way there and running along a busy highway when my day officially turned to shit.

I was running along the footpath when a silver coupe turned off the highway and into a laneway a short distance ahead of me. I thought the driver must've been heading towards the carpark at the rear of the shops, but he just stopped, right across the footpath.

I slowed to a walk then waited for him to move off the footpath but he just sat there, talking to his female passenger. Eventually, he glanced at me and I raised my hands as if to say, "What are you doing?"

He ignored me and just kept talking to his passenger and in the end, I had to walk out onto the highway to get past. I was

hot and bothered by this stage, so I slapped the boot of his car with my open hand as I walked past.



Image by [Robert Baker](#) on [Unsplash](#)

I then set off running again and was vaguely aware that the passenger had gotten out of the silver coupe to scream obscenities at me. Okay, I thought. I've had my say, she's had her say. Let's all just move on.

A few minutes later, I had just about reached the front entrance of my gym when I saw the silver coupe speeding towards me from the opposite direction. I had no idea they had followed me.

I'd made it only one or two steps up towards the gym when the driver grabbed me and started to drag me back towards the entrance, back towards where he'd left his car running. Then his passenger started to hit me.

It was the first time I'd been involved in any kind of physical confrontation off-duty and it scared the hell out of me. When you're on-duty, you have options and you have a partner there to help you. This was a whole different situation.

Do I try and fight? I thought. What are my chances, two-on-one? I could kick him in the balls. But that's only going to make them angrier.

Eventually, I remembered where I was. "That's a security camera right there," I said, pointing over my shoulder. "I'm a cop and I've got your rego."

I saw a look of surprise cross the man's face and he immediately backed away. His companion seemed tempted to go another round though, she was just completely feral. "Fucking cop!" she screamed at me, before finally following her partner from the foyer.

I was a complete mess. My heart was hammering in my chest, I was trembling all over and my legs were ready to buckle. But I made it up the stairs and into the safety of the gym, then headed straight over to the windows overlooking the carpark. I could see the couple had parked their car a short distance away and were standing beside it, discussing their next move. Or maybe they were waiting for me.

I approached a girl on a treadmill and told her what had just happened. Then I asked if she could use her phone to take a photo of the couple and their car and text it to me. She very kindly obliged. It was then that I noticed the couple had a young boy with them, presumably their son. He couldn't have been older than eight years old.



What a shining example to set for a child. What did they say to him about what just happened?

“Son, from time to time you’re going to hear people say that you should treat others as you would like to be treated. But that’s for pussies. Be a jerk. And if anyone takes exception to your being a jerk, chase them down and beat them.”

I waited in the gym until the couple left, then ran straight over to the local police station. I remember looking over my shoulder the whole way there, breathless and shaky, and absolutely panicking every time I saw a silver car.

Senior Constable Brett Howard* met me at the front counter and ushered me through the staff entrance and into the watch-house. It would be his one and only act of kindness towards me.

I’d met Brett a number of times when he’d bought offenders to my station for processing. I really didn’t have much of an opinion about him until this day.

He told me that the couple had just left, that they'd reported their side of the incident, I suppose as a kind of pre-emptive strike. I then told him my side of the story while he listened with what I can only describe as an expression of complete and utter indifference.

"The thing is," he told me, as he rolled his chair across the watch-house towards where the station roster was hanging. "I'm going on leave after next week, so if you want to report this, nothing will happen with it for a while."

I was stunned. I knew the language he was speaking. This was cop-talk for, "I don't give a fuck about what happened to you. Go away and leave me alone."



Brett made me feel that what had just happened to me was trivial. That it wasn't worth bothering about. He made me feel like shit.

His final words to me were, "So, let me know what you want to

do about it.”

I had fucking let him know what I wanted to do about it just by walking into his station. I was there to report it, but he made it clear he wanted nothing to do with it.

At no stage did he ask if I was okay and I left the police station a short time later, feeling alone and bewildered. My hands wouldn't stop shaking. Then I started to cry. Had Brett offered to organise a lift home for me, I would've accepted. But he didn't.

By the time I got home, he actually had me thinking that I'd made a big deal out of nothing. But then I told my mum what happened and my sister, and they were both horrified. They couldn't believe I'd been attacked and they couldn't believe how I'd been treated when I went for help. By a colleague.

What happened to me on the way to the gym that day eroded what little sense of safety I had left and made me even less trusting of people I didn't know. I started to avoid public places and it was eighteen months before I was able to set foot in that gym again.

What happened afterwards made me feel no better.

I know that over the years I'd had things reported to me that, in the big scheme of things, seemed pretty minor. But you just never know how a person feels about something until it's you standing on their side of the counter. A person walks into a police station to report an assault and to them, it could be the most traumatic thing that's ever happened. But because it's the sixth crime report you've taken that day, you treat it like nothing.

The whole experience got me thinking, did I treat people as badly as Brett treated me? On my worst days at work when I thought I hated the whole world and everyone in it, did I actually treat people like that? Though I was fairly sure I

never treated anyone quite that badly, I knew there were a number of times when I could've been kinder. And in realising that, I hated myself.

I saw my own failings in Brett Howard; numbness, anger and apathy. But as unhelpful as he was on the day, he also had something to do with me eventually making the changes that needed to be made.

Frankly, I just didn't want to be like that anymore.

Featured image by [Ross Findon](#) on [Unsplash](#)

(*not his real name)

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