

POLICE OFFICERS UNDER STRESS

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Late one afternoon, I received a call that a State Trooper from our county was missing. He did not come home as usual after his shift. I immediately knew something had to be wrong. I quickly dressed and joined the search. The officer was finally found in his patrol car, dead from a gun shot to the head. I could not believe he would have done this to himself. He had once told me personally, "If you ever find me like that (shot), you better start looking for the one who did it, because I would never do that to myself." It was determined by the State Crime Lab that he did indeed take his own life. What caused him to do it? Looking back I can remember seeing warning signs that he was under a lot of physical and emotional stress. He had not been his usual friendly self; he had become withdrawn and did not work with the rest of us like he had in the past.

On another, less traumatic, occasion, I awoke in the middle of the night, startled by my wife's yell, "Stop, James, stop, stop!" I then realized I was punching her right in the face. Nightmares have troubled me, off and on all of my police career. This particular nightmare involved a criminal, who

was trying to escape, and I had caught him, but he was fighting me, and I was fighting back.

On other occasions when I was dozing in my chair or on the couch and my wife or one of the kids touched me, I would sit straight up with a doubled fist ready to fight. What was the underlying cause for these actions/reactions? Was it stress?

According to Hans Selye, the foremost researcher in stress in the world, police work is “the most stressful occupation in America” (Constant, 1991). The stress of the occupation causes police officers to have one of the highest suicide rates in the nation, possibly the highest. Police officers are twice as likely to die by their own hand as by homicide (Goldfarb). The divorce rate of police officers ranks second in the nation, compared to other occupations. The national divorce rate is approximately fifty percent while the divorce rate for police officers is sixty to seventy-five percent (Goldfarb). Police officers suffer unusually high rates of alcoholism, being twice as likely as the general public to become problem drinkers (Constant, 1991). Stress is also a major factor in officer transfers, early retirement and career changes (O’Toole, Vitello, and Palmer). These are alarming statistics

that should send a warning signal to law enforcement management that something must be done to reduce stress.

Stress is an inherent part of police work. Huda (2003) states, “The job makes great demands on the mental, emotional and physical capabilities of the officers, often so stressful that they begin to destroy the individual.”

Some of those stressors are quite obvious, especially shootings, mass disasters and violent crimes, but what about those not so obvious stressors?

This paper will take a look at the many sources of police stress, the symptoms and effects, and what can be done to help.

SOURCES OF POLICE STRESS

Stress on a police officer can come from one or more sources and are broken down in many different ways. For the purpose of this paper, we will break the stressors down into the following categories: police work stress, department stress from policies and practices, external stress and internal stress.

POLICE WORK STRESS

Critical incidents such as shootings, mass disasters and violent crimes are distressing events for police officers that go far beyond the experiences

of the ordinary citizen. These traumatic stressors are the most obvious sources of psychological stress and are the source of most cases of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among police officers. According to Miller (2005), in the United States, two-thirds of police officers involved in shootings suffer moderate to severe problems. Mass disasters such as the 1989 Bay Area Earthquake, 9/11 Terrorist Attacks, and most recently, the Gulf Coast Hurricanes stressed some officers to the point of suicide. Gruesome and violent crime scenes, fatal vehicle accidents, and fires involving death or serious injury are also stressors which are easy to identify because of the intense emotional strain they cause on officers.

Shift rotations are a source of police work stress that can interfere and cause problems in the personal lives and responsibilities of officers. Huda (2003) states, "The disruptive effects of irregular work schedules on family centered activities, school delinquency, and adjustment problems among children are a heavy price paid by the police family." These shift rotations can also affect the officer's sleep patterns, building even more stress, and the lack of sleep can then, in turn, lead to poor physical health and less work productivity.

The dangers involved in routine police work can also create added stress for the officer. High speed chases, responding to a felony in progress, physical attacks, and routine traffic stops are examples of the physical threats that build stress on a daily basis. Closely associated to the dangers involved, is the fear an officer constantly faces that something may go wrong.

Boredom, alternating with the need for sudden alertness and mobilized energy can also create a certain amount of stress on officers. Patrol work most often involves routine, boring tasks, but the unpredictable nature of potential danger causes the officer to constantly be on alert which can wear the officer down as much as if he/she were in actual danger.

Role conflicts, the responsibility for protecting lives of others, the need to control emotions even when provoked, the fragmented nature of police work, the seriousness of the consequences of one's actions, and the ever presence of a gun are also stressors involved in police work.

DEPARTMENT STRESS FROM POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Administrative policies and practices are a huge source of police stress. Information obtained from the Central Florida Police Stress Unit (2004) states, "The most common source of police officer stress involves

policies and procedures of law enforcement agencies themselves.” In a study of reasons why officers across the nation had left the force, results showed that the top reasons for stress encounters and deciding to leave the force were because of these organizational issues: inadequate support by supervisor, inadequate support by department, poor or inadequate supervision, inadequate salary, difficulty getting along with supervisors and excessive paperwork (O’Toole, Vitello, and Palmer). Each law enforcement organization has its own policies and procedures and, most often, the officers are not involved in formulating these. Officers in supervisory positions are often caught in the middle. They must handle all of the office politics, personal issues and be able to work well with those above and below them. They not only have to take orders, but must issue and enforce them as well, knowing the officers will not always look on them favorably.

One officer patrol cars can create stress as the officer has no backup. There is also no one to talk to and confer with during those long shifts. This creates anxiety and a reduced sense of safety for the lone officer.

Internal investigation practices can be intimidating and make the officer feel he is not trusted. Often officers feel they have fewer rights than

the criminals they apprehend. The excessive paperwork involved in police work can be frustrating to the officer who would much rather be out on the street working. Poor pay, limited promotional opportunities, and lack of rewards for good performance are also organizational issues which cause stress problems for officers.

Even though police work is very dangerous organizational issues appear to be the cause of most of the stress to officers. They have the feeling that no one at the top understands their problems or cares and even worse, officers often believe that administration is out to get them.

EXTERNAL STRESS

Court appearances interfere with police officers' work assignments, personal time and even sleep schedules. Unfavorable court decisions, perceived leniency of the courts, court delays and continuances, and the release of offenders on bail, probation, or parole also lead to stress.

Negative publicity, distorted press accounts of incidents involving police, and allegations of brutality and racism are an external source of stress for some officers.

Negative attitudes toward police and perceived lack of support create further stress for officers. Police officers deal with the negative behaviors of

citizens every day. They most often see only the bad side of individuals.

This continual exposure to the negative side of citizens gives officers the perception that no one supports them or appreciates them for what they do.

Police officers are expected to believe that what they do is important, but are often discouraged by the lack of praise and recognition they receive from the law abiding citizens they protect.

Disapproval from fellow officers, family and friends for entering police work can cause added stress to women and minority officers. Often the woman's ability to "handle" the job is questioned, so they feel extra stress to prove themselves.

INTERNAL STRESS

Emotional problems confronting individual officers often stem from other stressors of police work and family problems. The development of attitudinal problems, behavioral problems and intimacy and relationship problems create stress that interferes with the officer's work performance.

Feelings of guilt, anxiety and fear are also sources of stress for officers.

Sleep problems such as nightmares and insomnia create added internal stress as well.

SYMPTOMS AND EFFECTS OF STRESS

The effects of stress are wide and varied. Serious medical problems that are related to stress include high blood pressure, heart ailments, circulatory disorders, digestive disorders, diabetes, and certain kinds of cancer. Stress can also cause premature aging and premature death.

Sleep disorders, especially insomnia and nightmares, are often results of stress. I can personally testify to this as noted earlier in this paper. I still have problems sleeping when I am stressed about something. The lack of sleep compounds the problem by making an officer tired, irritable and less alert. Chronic sleep disorders can contribute to poor physical health as well.

Depression, anxiety, paranoia, fear, anger, and panic reactions are effects exhibited by officers who are stressed.

Substance abuse is prevalent in police departments and law enforcement agencies of every size and type according to the Central Florida Police Stress Unit (2004). This includes over-the-counter-drugs, prescription drugs and alcohol. They are legal but often lethal to the stressed officer. Officers see what alcohol does to some of the citizens they serve and protect, but continue to drink knowing its dangers. They are often desperate

individuals hoping to manage their emotions by turning to alcohol, yet this alcohol can permanently damage the officer's career and family life.

Divorce rates among police officers are high. The job itself can put strains on relationships because of the shift rotations and extended hours. Officers must often work holidays too. These hours make it hard to spend quality time, if any time, with families. Problems faced on the job may be brought home to the family. Families deal with constant fear that something bad could happen. Low pay can cause financial hardships. Relationships often become troubled and distant leading to divorce.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder occurs when an individual's ability to cope is overwhelmed. It can result from years of accumulated stress or from single particularly traumatizing events. This severe stress disorder can cripple an individual's ability to do his/her job and live a normal life. Thankfully, this disorder is diagnosable and treatable. The warning signs of stress overload include irritability, sleep disturbances, changes of eating patterns, intrusive thoughts, a feeling of guilt, a lack of concentration and the onset of physical ailments such as headaches, stomach and bowel problems, and skin disorders. Muscle tension, fatigue and nervousness are also physical signs of stress.

Cynicism, absenteeism, burnout, early retirement, and job resignation also result from job stress. Good officers are lost because they can no longer handle the stress of the job.

Of all of the effects of stress, suicide is by far the most tragic. Approximately three hundred officers annually die by their own hand (Miller, 2004). Central Florida Police Stress Unit (2004) lists these possible reasons for the high suicide rate: continuous exposure to human misery, overbearing police bureaucracy, shift work, social strain, marital difficulties, inconsistencies of the criminal justice system, alcohol abuse and lack of control over working conditions. There is also the fact that officers have the ready availability of a gun, and suicide is often an impulsive act.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

All of the stress of police work cannot be stopped, but we can recognize it and help. We can educate officers and supervisors about the above mentioned symptoms, warning signs, and effects, provide help to individual officers, reduce stress caused by the police organization itself, and provide support and help to the officer's family.

EDUCATE OFFICERS AND SUPERVISORS

The effects and symptoms of stress are not the same for every officer. Personality, years of service, level of education, and use of coping strategies, are personal characteristics which affect stress levels. Social support structure, the intensity of the stressful event, and unique features of the organization can also affect the level of stress. Officers react to situations presented in different ways. Something that may severely stress one officer may not stress another officer in the same way.

Stress is referred to as the ‘silent killer’ or the ‘hidden assailant’ because we are often unaware of its effects and often don’t even realize we’re under stress until it’s too late. Therefore every officer and supervisor should be trained to recognize it and manage it in order to avoid serious effects.

Besides educating officers and supervisors on the effects and symptoms of stress, officers should also be trained regularly in stress management. The *Police Stress and Employee Assistance Programs* article suggests requiring complete retraining every five years (2004). This training will assist in the well-being of the officer and increase productivity.

Russell C. Doc Davis, Ph.D., in his article, *Stress- The Silent Cop Killer*, gives a list of twenty-one guidelines to help develop a powerful and positive defense against the effects of stress.

1. Know your strengths and accept your limitations.
2. Be introspective- take time to monitor yourself and be aware of what is going on and why.
3. Learn to laugh. Don't take life so seriously.
4. Organize yourself by developing plans and priorities, but be flexible enough to be able to respond to changing situations.
5. Remind yourself that you may not be able to control those things which happen around you or the actions and words of other people, but you have 100% ability to control your reactions to them.
6. Make certain that your plans and priorities include plenty of time for you and yours.
7. Learn simple relaxation techniques.
8. Spend a few minutes listening to some favorite music while focusing on slow, relaxing breathing.
9. Practice good nutrition.
10. Make sure your diet includes plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables and is rich in fiber and complex carbohydrates.
11. Limit your intake of sugar, alcohol, and caffeine.
12. Make sure you get enough vitamins and minerals. Anti-stress and anti-oxidants such as vitamins A, B-complex, C, D, and E are all important.
13. Listen when your body talks to you.
14. Avoid long term or regular use of medication, including over-the-counter drugs unless you are doing so under a physicians care.
15. Use relaxers such as aerobics, exercise, walking, jogging, swimming, yoga, massage, sauna, meditation, self-hypnosis, games, etc.
16. Learn to leave your job at work. This is one of the most difficult things for officers to do.
17. Develop time for family and friends.
18. For many, relying on your faith can be a solace and an anchor in a sea of uncertainty.

19. Get a hobby or two.
20. Learn to have long honest talks with that face in the mirror and to engage in some positive self talk.
21. Learn to say no.

INDIVIDUAL HELP

Individual help can be given in many forms depending on the needs of the individual officer. The number one priority here should be confidentiality. If the officer does not feel the help is confidential, he will not seek it. Stress trainings should make officers aware of the resources available so that they do not have to go to supervisors or other officers to obtain the resource information. Good insurance plans that provide outpatient counseling are a must. The availability of a psychologist and/or chaplain can be of help to individual officers. Resources for goal setting, time management, and financial planning should be made available. Individualized programs for physical fitness, proper diet and relaxation should be encouraged. Officers with substance abuse problems need somewhere to get help. A list of good internet resources could be made available at trainings. The availability of these individual programs sends the message that someone at the top does care.

REDUCE STRESS CAUSED BY POLICE ORGANIZATION ITSELF

It can be done! Agencies across the nation have taken steps to change their policies and procedures in an attempt to reduce officer stress, and have done it without the compromise of public safety. Changes can be made in supervisory style, field training programs, critical incident counseling, shift work, and job assignments. By improving communication and reducing organizational stress, the work climate becomes more positive. The improved morale and productivity enhances the overall department efficiency.

FAMILY LIFE CAN BE HELPED

Spouse and family are significant contributors to the success or failure of a law enforcement career. The stress of police work affects not only the officer, but also the officer's family. Spouses can and should be trained to see early warning signs of excessive stress and learn techniques of reducing it before job performance becomes affected. Orientation seminars for spouses would help them to understand the department better. Psychologist counseling and chaplain counseling should also be made available for the officer's family. Police appreciation dinners and family fun activities could help families to feel like they are a part of this "big police family."

CONCLUSION

Without question, the job of a police officer is extremely stressful. Officers and supervisors must be trained to recognize, manage and reduce this stress. Officers must take care of themselves by staying physically and psychologically fit. If stress does become a problem, confidential help should be readily available. By reducing officer stress, jobs, marriages and lives can be saved and a better attitude develops which means greater work efficiency.

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