

The Bill Blackwood  
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Supervisors' Responsibilities Regarding Officer  
Stress or Burnout

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## **ABSTRACT**

Negative stress and emotional burnout, is and has been a major problem within police departments for years. Today's police supervisors not only have to be concerned about their own negative stress level, but must also be responsible for detecting negative stress and potential emotional burnout in the officers working under their leadership. Supervisors need to be trained to identify the results of negative stress, symptoms of stress, techniques to combat stress, and how to counsel employees about stress.

Books, the internet, magazines, journals, personal interviews and a survey will be used to help identify symptoms of stress, how to combat those symptoms, and to determine the responsibility of police organizations and their supervisors.

A guideline for supervisors to systematically approach stress related issues of officers under their command will be devised. The direct results of this guideline should be increased officer well being, officer performance, and officer safety; as well as decreased officer use of force, citizen complaints and officer turnover, as well as saving a valuable asset to police departments.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Negative stress and emotional burnout, is and has been a major problem within police departments for years. Today's police supervisors not only have to be concerned about their own negative stress level, but must also be responsible for detecting negative stress and potential emotional burnout in the officers working under their leadership.

The main emphasis of this report is to determine what supervisors should do when they notice symptoms of negative stress or burnout in themselves and in officers for whom they are responsible. The police organization, with the cooperation of Human Resources, internal or external, should have a systematic course of action to be taken by supervisors, once symptoms of stress in themselves, or their subordinates, have been identified.

While some stress can be positive, negative stress and emotional burnout can become dangerous to police officers and detrimental to a police organization. An officer's negative stress can result in physical ailments, emotional instability, burnout, alcoholism, marital problems, excessive force, low productivity, and possibly suicide. The results of stress can become very costly to a police organization when it comes to excessive citizen complaints, morale problems and turnover rates. Police organizations must become proactive to not only protect their interests, but also their large investment in experienced police officers. The best way to be proactive is through training. Supervisors need to be trained to identify the results of negative stress, symptoms of stress, techniques to combat stress, and how to counsel employees about stress. Supervisors also need to know when the situation is beyond their control or expertise. At that time, supervisors need to know who has the expertise to better help that employee and refer that employee to that person.

To successfully complete this research, several resources will be tapped. Books, internet, magazine and journal articles, will be studied to help identify symptoms of stress, and how to combat those symptoms. Supervisors' and police organization responsibilities to officers experiencing negative stress and emotional burnout will also be researched using these sources. Personal interviews with Human Resource Directors and Police Psychologists will be conducted to determine guidelines that may already be in place to assist supervisors in choosing a course of action to be taken once they identify negative stress symptoms in employees. Finally, a survey of the current Bill Blackwood Leadership Command College attendees will be conducted. This survey will determine estimated percentages of officers who have experienced burnout, or have known other officers who have experienced burnout. The survey will also determine the percentage of police organizations who are being proactive in training their supervisors to identify stress and who have set guidelines to help assist officers experiencing stress or burnout.

It is the intention of this research to develop a guideline or policy that the Round Rock Police Department will be able to adopt and use. Hopefully, other police organizations will also be able to benefit from this research as well, by providing a step by step approach to recognizing, reducing, and combating officer s tress and burnout within their organization. The direct results of this guideline should be increased officer well being, officer performance, and officer safety, as well as decreased officer use of force, citizen complaints and officer turnover.

## **Review of Literature**

Stress is nothing new in the life of a police officer. Nor are the studies of stress and police officers. It is how stress is reacted to that is important. Supervisors must know how to deal with their own stress and be able to help subordinates with positive alternatives for controlling stress.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health defines job stress as "the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker" (Minter, 1999). Ellison & Gentz (1983) defined stress as "any demand placed on the person or any event that is experienced by the individual as change is stressful to some degree." Stress can be defined in three words "nerves", "anxiety", and "tension" (Bodger, 1999). Another facet of stress is situational stress, otherwise known as trauma, which might be experienced while working at a fatality scene (Chandler, 1990). All these definitions fit well with real life experiences of police officers. Post-traumatic stress is the development of characteristic symptoms following a psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of human experience (Kureczka, 1996).

Now what needs to be determined is what causes stress (also known as stressors) in police officers. There are five factors in the work environment that can act as stressors: (1) factors intrinsic to the job; (2) role in the organization; (3) relationships with the organization; (4) career development; and (5) organizational structure or climate (Cooper & Marshall as cited by Ellison & Genz, 1983). Pendergrass & Ostrove (as cited by Ellison & Genz, 1983) used the Spielberger Police Stress Survey to compare male and female officers from Maryland departments on rating of stressful events. Male and female officers listed the following as most stressful:

<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>
Fellow officer killed in the line of duty	Killing someone in the line of duty
Killing someone in the line of duty	Fellow officer killed in the line of duty
Exposure to dead or battered children	Exposure to dead or battered children
Inadequate support by department	Insufficient manpower
Insufficient manpower	Physical attacks on one's person
Competition for, or lack of advancement	Inadequate support by department
Physical attack on one's person	Making arrests while alone
Changing shift hours	Responding to a felony in progress

Even though there are some differences in the order of importance and the different stressors between men and women officers it is apparent that both male and female officers' experience the same types of stressors. During a survey of 100 Cincinnati patrol officers in 1974, they listed courts; the administration; faulty equipment; and community apathy as the main stressful situations (Kroes, Margolis, & Hurrell as cited by Territo & Vetter, 1981). Another study, involving San Jose Police Department, indicated the following as sources of stress for police officers: poor supervision, absence or lack of career development opportunities, inadequate reward reinforcement system, offensive administrative policies, excessive paperwork, poor equipment, agency jurisdiction isolationism, unfavorable court decisions ineffectiveness of corrections agencies to rehabilitate or warehouse criminals, misunderstood judicial procedures, inefficient courtroom management, distorted press accounts of police incidents, unfavorable attitude by the public, derogatory remarks by neighbors and others, adverse local government decisions, ineffectiveness of referral agencies, role conflict, adverse work scheduling, fear of serious injuries, disability and death, exposure to people suffering, and consequences of actions (Eisenberg as cited by Territo & Vetter).

It is important to consider the administrative perspective on officer stress. During a survey of Southeaster police chiefs in 1978, the chiefs indicated that the main causes of stress for patrol officers were: lack of administrative support, role conflicts, public pressure and scrutiny, peer group pressures, court and imposed role changes (Somodevilla city by Territo & Vetter, 1981). There are also specific assignments that cause stress, such as a heavy workload, conflicting or uncertain job responsibilities and job insecurity are stressors (Minter, 1999).

Police officers also experience stressors like everyone else from different walks of life. The leading causes of stress according to Bodger, (1999) are: (1) feeling of powerlessness, (2) time pressure, (3) money matters, (4) keeping up with the Joneses, (5) the Superhero complex, (6) chemical causes, (7) cigarettes, (8) alcohol, (9) drugs, (10) diet, (11) living in chaos, and (12) life changes. It is noted that change is a major factor in stress. "It is not the negative of change that stresses us out, it is change per se" (Barbour, 1998).

It appears that stressors can change in order of importance, or stressors can be added or deleted, from department to department, state to state, and region to region, depending on demographics and economic make-up of the departments.

Now that several causes of stress are known, it is important to determine how stress can affect officers both positively and negatively. The impact of stress is not determined by stress exposure itself, but by your response to that exposure (Loehr, 1997). Not all change, or even all change perceived as harmful, necessarily leads to negative consequences (Ellison & Genz, 1983). There is a positive side of stress. Stress response is the commonly used term for the body's hormonal reaction to protect itself against real or perceived threats, known as "fight or flight" (Barbour, 1998). This, fight or flight, concept forces us to make decisions that can affect our safety. "Stress exposure is the most powerful stimulus for growth in life. People invariably

grow the most in areas in which they've been pushed the most. Stress exposure expands stress capacity" (Loehr, 1997). When one is confronted with too many stressful events, or too severe ones, in too short a period of time, or for too extended a period of time, with too few personal, organizational or social supports, stress can lead to trouble (Ellison & Genz, 1983). It is determined that stress can be a very positive force in our life, but if not dealt with in a positive manner, it can be very detrimental to our physical, emotional, and mental well-being. There's a wide range of health effects to stress, including increased risks of cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, psychological disorders such as burnout, and gastrointestinal disorders, and workplace injuries (Minter, 1999). Police stress and burnout leads to alcoholism, which can be traced to the very nature of the police lifestyle (Lynn, 1998). Studies have shown that three fourths of heart attacks suffered by police officers are due to job-related stress (Territo & Vetter, 1981). Stress can affect your concentration, making you clumsy, lazy and all around cement-headed, which often manifests itself in mathematical mistakes or transposition of numbers (Men's Health, 2001).

Not only can stress be damaging to officers, it can also be harmful to police organizations. Stress can lead to faulty decision-making, disciplinary problems, excessive use of sick leave, tardiness, on-the-job accidents, complaints from citizens, and high officer turnover, which cost departments' time and money (Kureczka, 1996). The approximate cost to replace a five-year veteran is \$100,000; which includes costs of training, overtime benefits, testing for replacements, and knowledge (Kureczka, 1996). According to the Association of Insurance & Risk Managers, of the United Kingdom, stress is becoming the most common risk in any organization and usually goes undetected (Aldred, 2000). Once an officer has been hired, his problems become the responsibility of the department (Chandler, 1990). Cost is a major factor



in identifying and combating stress in police officers. "Work stress imposes enormous and far-reaching costs on workers' well-being and corporate profitability," (Rosenstock as cited by Minter, 1999). A police officer who suffers a heart attack, which is attributed to job-related stress, while off duty is entitled to workmen's compensation (Territo & Vetter, 1981). In 1981, the Los Angeles Police Department received more applications for stress-related disability pensions than it did for injury-related early retirements (Davis as cited by Chandler, 1990). In January of 2000, the United Kingdom agreed to pay settlement of \$332,450 to a former employee who retired at the age of 37, due to ill health caused by stress (Aldred, 2000).

The overall costs should be enough incentive for departments to do something to combat stress in their officers. Programs offered to help employees deal with their personal or work-related problems demonstrate management's concern for its workers (Stratton as cited by More & Unsinger, 1987). What are departments beginning to do about combating stress in police officers? Many departments and cities are now offering Employee Assistance Programs (EAP's), which give employees an opportunity to go outside of the department to receive confidential assistance. Supervisors are now being trained to detect the early signs of poor performance to apply discipline and to motivate employees to seek help (More & Unsinger, 1987). In the 1970's, the Los Angeles County Sheriffs Department started a program for spouses to address the special stresses encountered by the law enforcement personnel (Stratton & Stratton as cited by Chandler, 1990). In August of 1981, the Los Angeles Police Department allowed officers and civilian employees to conduct peer counseling on a voluntary basis (Klyver as cited by Chandler, 1990). Peer counseling for police is one avenue to pursue problems of police officers (Linden & Klein, 1986). An estimated 20-25% of the nations' police agencies have stress management programs (Sewell, 1986) It is important that police managers recognize

their moral and ethical responsibilities to assure the mental wellness of their officers and that they also recognize they too can be victims of stress. This requires them to be involved in the successful development of stress programs for their officers (Sewell, 1986). After reviewing what departments are doing, it is quite apparent, that these programs cannot be successful without the support and participation of supervisors.

### **Methodology**

The intention of this research is to develop a guideline or policy that the Round Rock Police Department will be able to adopt and use by providing a step by step approach to recognizing, reducing, and combating officer stress and burnout within the organization. The direct results of this guideline should be increased officer well being, officer performance, and officer safety, as well as decreased officer use of force, citizen complaints and officer turnover.

Books, the internet, magazine and journal articles were studied to help identify symptoms of stress and how to combat those symptoms. The study of literature was also used to determine the responsibility of police organizations and their supervisors.

Interviews with a Human Resource professional, Teresa Bledsoe of the City of Round Rock, and a psychologist Dr. Rick Bradstreet with the City of Austin, were conducted to gather information on current practices.

Finally, a survey was conducted of the March, 2001, Bill Blackwood Leadership Command College attendees, to help determine if there is a need for stress reduction training, or if supervisors need to be responsible for stress recognition in their officers. The survey consisted of the following questions:

**Stress/Burnout & the Supervisors' Responsibilities Survey**  
**April 5, 2001**

1. Department size \_\_\_\_\_ officers
2. Does your department have a human Resource representative within the department?
3. In your career, have you ever experienced burnout?
4. In your career, have you ever know another officer who experienced burnout?
5. Have you ever known of an officer who either lost his job or quit due to burnout?
6. .Does your department provide training about stress and stress management?
7. As a supervisor, have you ever been trained in identifying stress or burnout in officers?
8. As a supervisor, have you ever been given tools or guidelines on what your responsibilities are when you identify stress or burnout in an officer?
8. Does you department have a policy outlining the supervisor's responsibility when stress or burnout in an officer is detected?

**Findings**

After reviewing all the literature, it has been determined that the problem of stress in police officers, and how to deal with it, has been going on for quite some time. Few departments have programs designed to help supervisors detect stress in their officers, as simple as looking for personality changes, physical changes, and changes in work patterns (Ellison & Genz 1983).

Teresa Bledsoe, the Director of the City of Round Rock Human Resources Department, was extremely helpful in my quest for answers. She gave another term to consider besides being burned out, and that was the term "rust out". According to Bledsoe a person experiences "rust out" when they have talents or skills that they don't get to use, so they get bored and develop the same characteristics of someone who gets burned out. She said that the role of the supervisor is to take care of their people. Talking with people is a good barometer; as well as the first step to finding out what is troubling an individual. A big misconception is "if we don't talk about it, maybe it will go away." It won't. While talking to your people, listen. Listen to what they are

It is important that we confront stress issues because other people can take on the behaviors of saying; then determine if you can help them; or, if you need to refer that person to someone else. others who are stressed; and stress manifests itself in behavior, which is often times negative. Bledsoe recommends reminding people "it's okay to be sad, but don't live there." Sometimes you have to remind people that "they don't have to be in every traffic jam or dog fight that comes around." The tragic events that occurred on September 11, 2001, will probably bring some delayed stress symptoms in the future. Bledsoe explained that the problem is not stress, but the behavior it produces. She also told me that as supervisors, we should not, if possible, add to the stress of our people. One way that supervisors do that is that "the person that does the best job gets the most work." We as supervisors should create an environment in which people feel free to talk to us. Bledsoe made aware the City of Round Rock Employee Assistance Program that has been adopted and is available to all city employees, including police officers. She feels this program will give officers opportunities to discuss and perhaps solve their problems, with someone outside of their department. It should take away some of the stigma and perceived finger-pointing from others within their department. Bledsoe estimated the investment of the city of a five-year officer is easily a half a million dollars. "Turnover" is very expensive.

Dr. Rick Bradstreet, Psychologist for the Austin Police Department, Austin, Texas said that approximately thirty-five officers leave the Austin Police Department each year due to stress related issues. The average cost to replace these officers is approximately \$150,000 for the training, equipment, salary, and benefits for a first year officer. The Austin Police Department has had a Wellness Program in place, for which he has been part of for 23 years. Even though the program has been around awhile, he feels there is always room for improvement. One problem that he has encountered is the reluctance of officers to come and talk to "the shrink".

Once an officer comes to see him, he can usually build a rapport and help the officer. Another positive program, for the Austin Police Department, has been the Chaplin's Program, where officers can talk to someone outside the color of authority.

Dr. Bradstreet told me he felt it was critical that supervisors learn to detect performance problems, in officers, that can be attributed to stress. The first thing supervisors can start looking at is the officers' performance. The following table indicates performance issues:

Early Warning Performance Issues	
	• Unauthorized Absences
	• Excessive Sick Leave
	• Pattern Absences
	• Frequently Absent from Work-Site without Explanation
	• Work Inefficiency
	• Negative Attitude/Interpersonal Relationships

Dr. Bradstreet stressed the importance of talking with the officer in an attempt to find out what's troubling him. If a supervisor feels comfortable talking about the officer's problems, then by all means the supervisor should talk to him about them. If the supervisor doesn't feel comfortable, then the supervisor should refer the officer to someone else, and keep the officer's problems confidential. Officers, like civilians, are usually on a seven-year cycle, (i.e. the seven-year itch) where at the end of that cycle, boredom may set in, and they might need a new challenge. Some officers might be on a shorter cycle, where they may need a change of scenery or a new challenge every two years. But this won't be learned until the supervisor takes the initiative to talk to the officer. Dr. Bradstreet also mentioned that there is a possibility of some delayed reaction to the September 11, 2001 terrorist actions.

The results of the survey conducted with the March 2001, Bill Blackwood Leadership Command College attendees proved very interesting and indicated a need for stress related training throughout the police departments. Twenty-six departments responded and the results are as follows:

Stress/Burnout & the Supervisors' Responsibilities Survey April 5, 2001	
1. Department Size: 135 ( <i>Average</i> ) officers	
2. Does your department have a Human Resource Representative within the department? 8 Yes      18 No	
3. In your career, have you ever experienced burnout? 20 Yes      6 No	
4. In your career, have you ever known another officer who experienced burnout? 26 Yes      0 No	
5. Have you ever known of an officer who either lost his job or quit due to burnout? 22 Yes      4 No	
6. Does your department provide training about stress and stress management? 9 Yes      17 No	
7. As a supervisor, have you ever been trained in identifying stress or burnout in officers? 17 Yes      9 No	
8. As a supervisor, have you ever been given the tools or guidelines on what your responsibilities are when you identify stress or burnout in an officer? 11 Yes      15 No	
9. Does your department have a policy outlining the supervisor's responsibility when stress or burnout in an officer is detected? 0 Yes      26 No	

In this survey, out of 26 officers surveyed, it was noted that:

- . 77% of the officers have experienced burnout in their career
- 85% have known of a fellow officer who has lost his job or quit due to stress related issues.
- . 100% of the officers have known other officers who have experienced burnout
- . 69% of the departments do not have a Human Resource representative dedicated to their department
- . 65% of the departments do not provide stress training
- . 58% of the supervisors have never been given guidelines regarding recognizing stress in officers
- . 100% of the officers said their departments don't have a policy outlining supervisor's responsibility when stress or burnout is detected in an officer.

## **Discussion/Conclusion**

Police officers not only have the same day to day stress of other people, but they have increased stress due to the nature of their job. Officers have to make the rent, or pay a mortgage; they have bills to pay, children to rear, and marriages and relationships to maintain. Then, they have to come to work and often deal with office politics, inconsistent or poor management, stressful training, low pay for the risks involved, boredom, extreme adrenaline rushes, dangerous incidents, heart-wrenching disasters, and the list goes on, and on. With all these stressors in a police officer's life, he is seldom shown how to deal with the stress; and if taught about stress, he's seldom ever given a refresher course. When stress continues to build, without some sort of release, it can turn into some nasty by-products, such as poor job performance, unsafe practices, poor physical health, heart attacks, unemployment, alcoholism, drug use, post traumatic stress and possibly suicide, the leading cause of death in police officers.

While some very pro-active departments have wellness programs, with an emphasis on officer stress, many more departments do not. Most supervisors are not given guidelines as to what steps are taken once you discover an officer is in a phase of burn out. There are several programs that have been found successful, like: wellness; mandatory fitness; peer counseling; stress training; and psychological counseling. Not adopting any of these programs can be extremely costly to police departments and cities due to on-the-job accidents, workmen's compensation claims, sick time, employee retention, poor performance, negative image to the public, and again, the list goes on.

Negative stress and emotional burnout, is nothing new to the police profession. There have been studies regarding stress and the negative consequences of stress for many years. Today's police supervisors have to be concerned about their own negative stress level and how to keep it under control. For the sake of the department and the people that work them, supervisors must also be responsible for detecting negative stress and potential emotional burnout in the officers working under their leadership.

Research indicate that studies have been conducted for years regarding stress, and findings have determined that police departments are losing valuable and costly assets (police officers) to stress, and most police departments aren't doing much about it. Most departments are lacking, in regards to battling stress in their officers, nor are they using their supervisors as a resource to address stress issues of officers.

Some departments who have taken the initiative to do something about stress have implemented "mandatory" wellness programs, therefore putting more stress on the out of condition officers. The Round Rock Police Department has taken a positive step forward and has offered monetary rewards for officers who meet a certain fitness level. Wellness programs



are vital to the over all well being of police officers. All police departments should have one, but need to discover inventive ways to encourage officers to participate willingly, and not force them to participate.

Depending on the size and financial resources of a police department, they should have a dedicated Human Resource representative, and a Police Psychologist available to their officers. There should be a strong emphasis on "Police" Psychologist, someone who is familiar with the trials and tribulations of police officers, and someone who has walked a mile in police officers' shoes. Chaplain Counseling programs and Peer Counseling programs are also beneficial to police officers experiencing the effects of stress. It gives officers someone to talk to, who is not in authority, and with little cost to a department.

Stress training should be provided to all officers, from officers up to management, on an annual basis; and if at all possible, include the officers' spouses. Maybe this will be a good way to gently coax officers to become part of a Wellness Program, and a way to encourage them to use any available counseling programs.

Above all, train the supervisors. Once supervisors learn to detect stress in themselves, they can be easily taught how to detect stress in others. This will also be a good time to point out ways for supervisors to avoid becoming part of the negative stress in police officers lives. Counseling techniques should be taught during their training. Often times, supervisors can ward off potential problems by using proper counseling techniques. Finally, outline what the supervisors' role and responsibilities are when it comes to dealing with overly stressed officers:

### Supervisors' Guide to Dealing with Stress in their Officers

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- Learn to recognize stress in an officer
- Talk to the officer
- Counsel the officer, if supervisor feels comfortable doing so
- Refer officer to another resource, i.e. Peer Counselor, Chaplain, Human Resource Representative, or Police Psychologist
- Document, Document, Document
- Follow Up

Documentation is a very important step because it protects the supervisor and the department should a disgruntled employee state: "They never did anything to try and help me." Keep in mind, the officer needs to take some responsibility in this matter, and supervisors should not feel the added weight on their shoulders. Supervisors should do what they can for the officer, but that doesn't mean doing everything for the officer.

Officers are too valuable of an asset to a department to lose to stress or burnout.

Supervisors can be, and should be, a key element in the battle against stress and burnout within a police department.

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