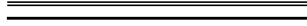


**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**



Overcoming Stress Through Effective Leadership



**A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**



**By
Roy Shelton**

**College Station Police Department
College Station, Texas
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ABSTRACT

Police officers undertake a large amount of stress through their work environment and even through their personal life. If the stress load is increased, prolonged, and untreated, the situation could easily become unbearable and lead to harmful circumstances. With an abundant amount of stress over time and without early detection or intervention, the outcome could lead to broken families or much worse. Other possible results are divorce, early retirement, or even death. Law enforcement agencies should be concerned about the psychological welfare of their officers.

To maintain the success of the agency and community perceptions, law enforcement agencies should take the stand to protect the police officers as it relates to on-the-job stressors. It is important to seek out advice and define procedures or rules to protect their officers. To help maintain a balanced officer, agencies should try to meet most, if not all, of their psychological needs. Law enforcement agencies could help by lowering the burden of stress through education, training, and equipping their supervisors to better understand the psychological, physiological, and behavioral responses from officers burdened with stress. Furthermore, law enforcement agencies could further help their officers from a mental health standpoint by having a departmental police psychologist readily available to evaluate and assist officers who are showing the indicators or have been involved in a tragic event.

It is imperative that law enforcement agencies protect the mental wellness of their police officers. In order to maintain a balanced officer, the agency should meet all of their psychological needs through proper training. By ignoring this aspect of an officer's life, it could be dangerous to the officer, agency, and community.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction.....	1
Position.....	4
Counter Position.....	8
Recommendation	10
References	12

INTRODUCTION

Nobody would argue that at least at some point in a person's lifetime, they experience stress. Police officers are no exception. Police officers undergo many types of stressors, including mental fatigue and physical exhaustion. These are basic everyday stressors that become a way of life for a police officer. Most of this stress is tolerated. However, if the stress load is increased, prolonged, and untreated, the situation could easily become unbearable and lead to harmful circumstances.

Stress is often associated with personal matters, but it can also be linked to the environment at work. When referring to personal matters, police officers are not only suffering from the stress they undertake, family members and loved ones often suffer as well. With an abundant amount of stress over time and without early detection or intervention, the outcome is capable of leading to broken families or much worse. The result could possibly lead to divorce, early retirement, or even death.

Stress is a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.). When evaluating stress as a verb, it is known to cause mental or emotional strain or tension (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.). Depending how stress is imparted on the officer, it often is portrayed in a negative viewpoint. The volume of stress is either received in a lesser or greater amount. When received in a great amount and over a long period of time, it has the potential to become dysfunctional and could result in loss of productivity. It is relevant to note that not all stress is bad or perceived to be evil. Stress can actually be positive when received for a short period of time. Stress can be motivating and even yield productivity and creativeness.

There are many avenues of handling or dealing with stress. Several techniques include partaking in physical activity such as taking nature walks or regular exercise, enjoying hobbies, participating in sports, meditation, or reading a book. Likewise, there are unhealthy avenues people take when dealing with stress. Some examples are excessive drinking of alcoholic beverages, compulsive spending, overeating, partaking in tobacco products, and consuming too much caffeine.

Many people would think police officers go through their career with the skill and the ability to handle stress. However, some might not have the skill to effectively handle the stress that comes their way. Stress can come from many different factors. Some factors can be caused from witnessing or working with serious and significant events, such as vehicular collisions, assaults, and death. Other factors that can stem from the work environment include leadership effectiveness, job tasks, dysfunctional norms, competition, change within the department, and the everyday possibility of danger.

Police officers are on duty 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Work does not stop after the police officer ends their shift. They can frequently experience social isolation (International Chiefs of Police [IACP], 2014, p.10). This happens when officers who are off-duty, tend to only socialize with other officers. Family, friends, and other acquaintances expect the off-duty police officer to know everything that is or has occurred inside their jurisdiction. They will often receive phone calls, text messages, or contact by other means, while off-duty, with questions similar to “why is traffic backed up on the highway, or what was stolen from the local pharmacy, etc.” Police work often controls an officer’s life. Often times, they are needed for their testimony in court, which may or may not go to trial, and the officer is placed on a “stand-by” mode. With on-duty

and off-duty stressors, the police officer's family is greatly impacted. It is of great importance for police officers to seek assistance for handling their stress. Assistance can come through their department, a support group, family, friend, church, or even through regular exercise. It is imperative to gain assistance and fight to overcome the stress before it becomes unbearable.

There are many health concerns as it relates to stress. Violanti (2012) indicated, "fatigue is a feeling of weariness, tiredness, or lack of energy, which may be related to both physical and mental strain, leading to the inability of an organism to respond to stimuli" (p. 17). Violanti defined fatigue as an overall condition of being tired that are due to disturbances in "allostasis," which can be caused by sleep disturbances and hormone levels (2012, p. 17). Violanti (2012) defined "allostasis as the maintenance of physiological stability through change". Violanti found that an "allostatic load refers to the wear and tear that the body experiences due to repeated cycles of allostasis as well as the inefficient turning on or shutting off of these responses" (2012). Violanti added that the allostatic load seems to be helpful in explaining the erosion and depletion of the body during stressful events (2012).

There are a number of law enforcement agencies that have an early warning system. This specific system deals with the review of use-of-force incidents to reduce citizen complaints and handle the difficult police officer. The early warning system is a good system, but it would appear that stress is a factor leading up to the early warning system. The reasoning for this paper is to encourage a kind of "early intervention system" for the detection of overbearing stress placed upon a police officer. The agency can prepare and train personnel to reduce the physiological response when it

comes to stress. When personnel are properly trained, they should know how to reduce the demand by knowing what exactly is causing the stress.

Furthermore, it will offer several foreseeable methods to help police officers overcome stress. It is imperative that the law enforcement agency make an effort to keep their employees. The department invests a lot of time and money in a police officer, from training to police equipment and work related hours. The department must be able to find a solution to the growing problem and search for guidance at acquiring the right protocol of detecting and handling police officers who are overly stressed. This paper will focus on the police officer's stress and ways to overcome it. Through examination and research, indicators of stress will be explored, statistics associated with broken families will be provided, and the number of police officer suicides will be discussed. Law enforcement agencies should be concerned about the psychological welfare of their officers.

POSITION

The psychological welfare of a police officer is extremely important. To maintain the success of the agency and community perceptions, law enforcement agencies should take the stand to protect the police officers as it relates to on-the-job stressors. It is important to seek out advice and define procedures or rules to protect their officers. While protecting police officers tactically is important, it is just as important to protect them mentally.

Domestic violence and suicide are a tragedy, especially when law enforcement is involved or accused. Davis (2005) stated, "Reactive intervention (after a crisis occurs) by law enforcement, psychologists, and domestic violence advocates must become

more proactive” (para. 2). He said, “Punitive policies and programs alone need to be evaluated for their effectiveness” (Davis, 2005, para. 2). Davis (2005) went on to add that “proactive intervention, preventative family counseling, and other support services must be incorporated with reactive punitive sanctions to prevent or minimize further and future domestic violence incidents” (para. 2). Roufa (n.d.) indicated, “the national average for divorce across all occupations was 16.96 percent, compared to 14.47 % for law enforcement careers” (para. 8). He goes on to say that “the data showed the divorce rate to be 15.01 % for police and patrol officers, as opposed to just over 12 % for both detectives and police supervisors” (Roufa n.d., para. 8). Through Roufa’s finding, it appears the patrol division endures more stress. This could be from the amount of calls for service they respond to and also the tragic events they witness.

When looking at the number of suicides involving a law enforcement officer, the numbers can be heartbreaking. Davis (2005) reported that every 22 hours, law enforcement officers would commit suicide (para. 9). This is three times the national average and four times the number of felony death rates (Davis, 2005, para.9).

Another way to help maintain a well-rounded officer is by meeting all of their psychological needs. Law enforcement agencies could help by lowering the burden of stress through education, training, and equipping their supervisors to better understand the psychological, physiological, and behavioral responses from officers burdened with stress. It is imperative that supervisors acknowledge the telltale signs. Psychological responses can be emotional or defensive. Physiological responses can be sweating of the hands or body and increased heart rate, while a behavioral response can be avoidance and evasive tendencies.

Supervisors can make a big impact on their officers since they are often the first source of information and the “go to” person. Supervisors are leaders, and they should be properly trained to be a leader. They need to know how to manage themselves before they can manage others. Again, proper training in this area is essential. Supervisors need to get involved and know their employee's typical behavioral patterns, both mentally and physically. Ideally, supervisors should be made aware of what is going on in the officer's life, both from a work standpoint as well as any significant personal issues that could have an impact on the officer's work performance. If done correctly, this could lead to a trusting relationship between the supervisor and officer.

It can be of great value to have a family support system. The IACP (2014) introduces a method of family networks, where the “Spouse and family networks can organize speakers and training for officers' families” (p.14). It goes on to add the “children should be involved as well, as they too may recognize changes in their parents and may become the ‘first responders’ to officers with mental illness or suicidal behavior,” (IACP 2014, p.14).

Ignoring this aspect could be dangerous to officers, agency, and community. Sadly, there are many instances where police officers are exposed to tragic events that are not easy to overcome or escape from the forefront of their mind. They will often try to fight the thought of needing help because they do not want to be considered as weak or make it appear that they cannot handle the job. Unfortunately, overcoming the stressful event can be a very difficult and lengthy process. Brosnan (1999) talked about his studies and concluded that “researchers have found that 13 to 35 percent of all police officers suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as its symptoms are

defined by the American Psychiatric Association-far greater than the incidence of 1 percent in the general population” (para. 2). Brosnan (1999) goes on to add, “PTSD is an extreme form of stress disorder that can occur as the result of a threatening event, which evokes fear, helplessness, or horror” (para. 3). People who suffer from PTSD experience a state of hyper-vigilance and mental conflict (Brosnan, 1999, para.3). Brosnan (1999) also stated “many untreated victims of PTSD, police officers and others, resort to abusing alcohol or other substances in an attempt to relieve the painful effects of the disease” (para. 3). He contends that some people think the ultimate act of desperation is when a police officer that is suffering from PTSD commits suicide (Brosnan, 1999, para. 3). Brosnan (1999) then added “police officers suffer a greater incidence of PTSD than the general population because it is their duty to confront violence in our communities” (para. 11). It is too often that police officers are made to go into situations that the majority of people run from citizens (Brosnan, 1999, para.3). In his research, Brosnan (1999) saw that there is a high correlation between people who suffer from PTSD and alcoholism (para. 17). According to Brosnan (1999), “alcohol suppresses nightmares-or at least the memory of them after waking” (para. 17). He says it provides only temporary relief from sleeping problems, such as insomnia, and also allows the victim's mind relief from thoughts of the traumatic memory (Brosnan, 1999, para. 17).

Research conducted by Felt (n.d.), with the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress (AAETS), indicated that “in just over the past decade, it has become common knowledge that law enforcement personnel, along with other emergency services workers, are a population highly prone to suffering with Post Traumatic Stress

Disorder (PTSD)” (para.1). Felt (n.d) further indicated “as a direct result of their work, there is regular involvement with traumatic events over the course of their entire careers” (para.1).

Law enforcement agencies could further help their officers from a mental health standpoint by having a departmental police psychologist readily available to evaluate officers who are showing the indicators or have been involved in a tragic event. With the overwhelming number of significant events lingering over officers, each officer should be evaluated yearly by a police psychologist, if not more frequently. IACP (2014) discusses the use of routine “check-ins” for mental health wellness (p.14).

COUNTER POSITION

There are counter arguments that the police officer should be obligated to ask for help when he or she is in a crisis. Some believe it should be the responsibility of the officer to come forward, rather than waiting for the problem to pass, or a supervisor to get stuck with addressing the officer’s problem or issue. These people think it should not be the agency’s responsibility to seek and find officers inside their organization who might possibly be suffering from a psychological issue.

The concern about officers being responsible in addressing any psychological disorder they might have is a valid point and makes for a good discussion. Brosnan (1999) stated with people who are experiencing symptoms of PTSD, “the victim persistently shuns thoughts, feelings, or conversations associated with the trauma and avoids activities, places, and people that spark recollection of the traumatic event” (para. 9). Furthermore, Brosnan (1999) said, “peer pressure and academy training may encourage police officers to develop defense mechanisms that exaggerate their sense

of control and physical strength and toughness” (para. 28). He goes on to say that an officer’s “go-it-- alone attitude probably makes him reluctant to seek treatment for symptoms of job-related stress” (Brosnan, 1999, para. 28). Felt (n.d.) stated, “police officers avoid discussion about job-related stress because they believe that it should not be bothering them. They have a concern about being seen as "mentally ill" or "unfit," because this can mean the loss of their job” (p.1).

Another reason is that the cost for properly training and other related expenses could deflate the budget and hinder other operations inside the law enforcement agency. Havemann (n.d.) reports “in 2008 the world economy faced its most dangerous crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930’s” (para. 1). Almost no industry was spared the struggles of the economic decline and that included law enforcement and other first responders.

Many would probably agree that the training costs can get quite expensive, but funding assistance could be found, whether by word of mouth, or through Internet websites. Law enforcement agencies could seek funding through federal grants or other types of grants. Slahor (2005) stated, “There are around one hundred and seventeen thousand federal websites offering grants” (para. 1). Slahor (2005) went on to say that “there are far more websites than that for regional, state, county, local and private organizations” (para. 1). Additionally, “There are increases in the levels of funds available for prevention and intervention at the state and local levels” (Slahor, 2005, para. 1). Furthermore, Slahor (2005) said, “agencies should access state grants for training through the US Senate and House Conference Committee Reports” (para. 16). Through further research in this subject, “Congress approved more than \$160 million

grants for states and localities to train first responders, upgrade and test equipment and provide management oversight” (“Training, equipment upgrades,” 2003, para. 1). There are many ways to acquire funding in order to obtain the necessary training.

RECOMMENDATION

Stress affects all officers in at least some point in their career. If not handled properly, the outcome could be detrimental to the officer, organization, and community. The problem of having stress in life does not appear to ever go away. However, being able to properly maintain the level of stress a person accumulates is important. Nonetheless, it is important that the supervisor be involved in detecting and helping to address the issues related to stress. The agency as a whole should be responsible in maintaining a healthy work environment. Stress is not going away, but being able to overcome and balance it is very important to the officer, agency, and community.

There are a number of ways to handle stress. Tartakovsky (n.d.), with World of Psychology noted ten ways to handle stress (p. 1). Tartakovsky (n.d.) stated “Figure out where the stress is coming from, consider what can be done to control it and work on that, do what you love, manage your time well, and to create a box of techniques,” (Tartakovsky, n.d., p.1). She went on to advise to “pick off the negotiable from your plate, ask if you are leaving yourself vulnerable to stress, preserve good boundaries, realize the difference between worrying and caring, and finally embrace mistakes or at least don’t drown in perfectionism” (Tartakovsky, n.d., p.1).

Another way to make sure officers are psychologically healthy is for the officers to be able to have the opportunity to meet with a police psychologist. Officers should

meet with a police psychologist at the very least for yearly evaluation. The success of the agency and community perception depends on it.

It is essential to not overlook the financial strain from getting proper training and other non-foreseeable needs. But, with accurate research, it is achievable to find grants to take the burden of training needs. Likewise, it is important the police officer take responsibility for maintaining any personal issue or questionable psychological stress. Not always will an officer come forward to speak about stress related problems. As Felt (n.d.) mentioned, they do not want to feel “mentally ill” or “unfit” (para.3).

In conclusion, it is imperative that law enforcement agencies protect the mental wellness of their police officers. In order to maintain a balanced officer, the agency should meet all of their psychological needs through proper training. By ignoring this aspect, it could be dangerous to the officer, agency, and community.

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