

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

=====

**Occupational Stress Recognition and Management**

=====

**An Administrative Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Required for Graduation from the  
Leadership Command College**

=====

**By  
Kyle James Sission**

**Memorial Villages Police Department  
Houston, Texas  
August 2005**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction . . . . .	1
Review of Literature . . . . .	3
Methodology . . . . .	5
Findings . . . . .	7
Discussions/Conclusions . . . . .	10
References . . . . .	12

## ABSTRACT

Occupational stress recognition and management have become a growing concern for law enforcement officials in past years. A major problem in dealing with these issues has been identified as a lack of a proactive approach to the problem by law enforcement managerial personnel. By review of literary materials and a survey instrument, these ideologies were explored during this research. During the analysis of the survey document, it was discovered that one hundred per cent of the managers surveyed recognized a responsibility to subordinates in assisting with the recognition and management of stress. What came to be the center of attention was, of those managers, less than twenty percent have ever been trained on how to deal with these issues. Law enforcement managers have demonstrated a need for the development of a program to educate them in ways to be more effective in assisting subordinates with this important and widespread issue facing the police community.

## INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement agencies have long been aware of the fact that stress can and does enter into the lives of the people who work in the profession. Over the past few years, the law enforcement community has become more and more aware of the impact that stress can have on both the department, as well as, individual officers. There are many experts that believe that stress is a result of changes in the environment. There are others that would argue that stress is a result of how one responds to those environmental changes. Selye (1974) broadened this definition when he stated, “stress is the body’s non-specific response to any demand placed upon it” (p. 52).

Stress normally carries a negative connotation, but it can be used to help the body and fuel healthy competition. For instance, stress felt by a musician prior to a performance can challenge one to excel in the performance and could become a source of positive energy. In this document, stress will be examined under negative conditions and for the negative affects it has on the body. Once the negative effects are identified, one can begin to examine ways to relieve or eliminate the causes of the stress. Unrelieved stress can bring on a multitude of complications both physically and emotionally, therefore, relief becomes of the utmost importance. Some of the results of unrelieved stress include high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, chronic headaches, fatigue and in its most severe stage, suicide. Administrators are beginning to realize that stress can also cause extreme financial burdens on police departments. Excessive absenteeism, disability, premature retirement compensation, and high replacement costs for disabled officers, all direct resources away from effective crime prevention and law enforcement activities (Davis, 1992, p 12). With this in mind, it becomes very clear that finding causes and solutions to stress is vital to the good over all health of law enforcement professionals.

There are many ways in which the effects of stress and methods for controlling stress can be inquired about. The methodology in this document will include the examining the literature of health care providers as well as those writings prepared by specialists in the field of occupational stress. U.S. Department of Justice journals will be used as well, as that agency has recently begun to take a stronger look at the effects of stress on officers and the possible liability that the department takes if the issue is not properly addressed. Another option may be to pole individual officers as to how their departments deal with stress related issues and then analyze those samples for commonly used techniques with successful outcomes. It is anticipated that there will be some common denominators between existing successful programs that will identify some major work related sources of occupational stress. By identifying those sources, the expectation would be that some suggestions for control mechanisms for departmental success in the battle to provide some methods of stress release would become apparent.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

In order to deal appropriately with stress, we must identify the common causes of stress. Stress researchers and theorists have discovered that there are two major causes of occupational stress as it relates to law enforcement. The first type of stress is called acute stress. This is considered a stimulus that causes a significant change in the physiological, philosophical, and behavioral responses. In police work, this means that officers will act differently under high stress situations than they will under less stressful situations. Some factors that cause acute stress are; unpleasant remarks from others, making a wrong or bad decision, making an arrest, facing a dangerous situation, and a reprimand from a supervisor. According to Anshel (2000), the best approach to reducing an officer's physiological and behavioral response to perceived acute stress is to use effective coping strategies (p.378).

The second type of police related stress is identified as chronic stress. Chronic stress is caused by a multitude of factors to include; poor relationships, regular assignments to unsafe patrol areas, poor health, mismanaged fiscal affairs, and chronic discomfort or pain. When left unmanaged, chronic stress can cause a break down in the body's immune system. This can lead to an array of medical illnesses and diseases that contributes to an officer's frequent absenteeism. Physiologically, ongoing stress reduces mental functioning, leading to slower, less accurate decision making, heightened unpleasant emotions such as anxiety and depression; and loss of desirable personal dispositions such as self-esteem, confidence, and a sense of self-control in ones life (Violanti and Aron, 1993). According to Anshel (2002) the long term effect of inadequately dealt with stress, include reduced job satisfaction and performance, mental withdraw, and an increased likelihood that an officer will terminate his work relationship with the department (p.279). Because the cost related to the hiring and training of officers is so high, it become imperative that police administrators have the ability to recognize these symptoms and enact adequate coping strategies.

Developing adequate stress management skills for officers becomes important to police administrators for several reasons. Police officers who lack leadership in dealing with stress may resort to the use of maladapted coping skills that may lead to additional problems. Police officer's who use maladaptive coping skills (e.g., excessive alcohol intake, drug use, smoking and overeating) or fail to interpret work-related events accurately and react in a rational manner, will experience chronic long-term stress (Hurrell, 1995 Nordlicht, 1979). If left unmanaged, these problems could result in an officer using poor judgment to the point of bringing civil liabilities upon his department. This would be a major reason that police administrators should

take a proactive approach to dealing with stress and its effects on the officer within the department.

Burnout and low retention rates, even after the first year on the force, are well known problems in police work. These outcomes are particularly unfortunate for both the department and the individual officer. Should managers take a more proactive approach to stress, these outcomes could be avoided, thus, that department could retain trained officers at a higher rate, and an officer who joined the department with honorable intentions would be able to continue his career (Anshel, 2000). For example, Brewer, Wilson and Beck (1994), among many others have called for police supervisors to provide officers with social support and resources to improve emotional functioning and performance (p. 280).

In comparison, most academicians acknowledge that occupational stress can be detrimental to officers as well as the department is left unmanaged. Similarly, most agree that both praise and constructive critical feedback are essential for providing positive reinforcement of the officers' skills and need for perceived competence and an inherent component of motivation (Lazarus, 1990; McCrae, 1992). Methods of dealing with stress differ greatly among mental health practitioners. Some feel each person needs an individually developed program with his individual personality and symptoms in mind. Some practitioners feel that a well designed, structured, and general approach is sufficient for managing occupational stress. Nonetheless, all practitioners seem to agree that any administrative action is better than no action at all.

## **METHODOLOGY**

It is hypothesized that a survey of twenty law enforcement agencies in Texas will show that current techniques used for identifying and coping with stress among line officers is limited

and could be improved upon. Basically, and as simply as it can be stated, stress is mental, emotional or physical strain or tension. According to Loo (1984), the short-and long-term effects of stress depend in large part upon the individual's available coping strategies and their effective use (p.10). It is further expected that this document will indicate that police administrators recognize stress as a problem. However, administrators do little to assist subordinates in developing strategies to cope with the problem.

Clearly, one factor that contributes to police occupational stress is the lack of, or perceived lack of, organizational and supervisory support. Although most interactions with others in the force are supportive and pleasant, researchers have found that these relationships can at time be contentious (Evans and Coman, 1992). According to Ellison and Genz (1978) "Supervisors and police administrators need to realize that crucial nature of the role, and help to develop techniques for satisfying the needs of their subordinates in ways that enhance their abilities to perform their duties" (p.7).

Reviews of literature as well as the circulation of a survey instrument (Appendix A) have been used to compile data for this document. A questionnaire comprising eleven questions was sent to twenty for Law Enforcement agencies across Texas. The agencies ranged in size from fourteen employees to five hundred and seventy. There was a one hundred per cent return rate of the inquiry document. The documents were analyzed to determine the number of police agencies that take a pro-active approach to stress management. Data was further analyzed to determine if supervisors are trained to assist employees with stress related problems and to determine the primary perceived cause of stress for police officers in general.

## **FINDINGS**



Stress management, as practiced by the FBI, involves three distinct steps: understanding, recognizing, and coping. The understanding and recognizing steps occur preincident, wherein administrators take great care to ensure personnel understand the nature of the stress response and learn to recognize the common symptoms experienced by those responding to stressful events (D.C. Sheehan, 1999). Understanding and recognition are first and foremost in the attempt to deal with the problems related to stress. They take precedent in the attempt to combat the adversarial effects of stress on police officers. During the analysis of the survey document, it was discovered that one hundred per cent of the police administrators surveyed agreed that they have a responsibility to subordinates in assisting with identification and management of stress. That number is in agreement with FBI analysis, however what was of great interest is that eighty per cent of those surveyed say they receive no formal training in the recognition or management of stress. Basically, law enforcement managers recognize stress as a problem, but only about twenty per cent of agencies take an active role in training employees to recognize and manage stress.

The administrator or supervisor needs to assess him or herself on a regular basis and recognize whether he or she is out of touch with the street officer. This could mean working in the field for two or three weeks out of the year. It is important to note that the administrator or supervisor cannot keep in touch just by talking. When an administrator or supervisor is called upon to deal with an officer who is under severe stress, he or she must first realize that the subject officer is of quality, and then do whatever is necessary to retain him or her as an extremely valuable resource. He or she must also realize that the officer is a human being and personal problems, such as severe stress, sometimes, can and does affect overall performance on the job.

Interestingly enough, only 20 per cent of the administrators surveyed for this document have ever been trained in how to accomplish this important task. According to Niederhoffer (1969), stress reactions vary by characteristics of the personality, social support structure, life experiences, years of service, level of education, use of coping strategies, the intensity of the stressful event, and any unique features of the organization. A serious problem is that many police departments view police stress as an employee problem, not an organizational problem. Rarely is the bureaucratized, paramilitary structure of the organization suspected of being the problem, although it probably is, and indeed, internal, departmental stressors are the most aggravating (p.167-68). Consistent with that statement, is the fact that fifty six per cent of the administrators surveyed for this research reported that the “job” was the primary cause of stress in their lives. It is easy to understand why this element is so readily over looked if one realizes that in order to eliminate stress from within the organization, one would need to admit that there may problems in the day to day operating procedures of the organization. More simply stated, in order to effectively deal a problem, one must recognize and admit that such a problem may exist. Traditionally, law enforcement is reluctant to admit to shortcomings within the organization.

Coping with stress is the third distinct step currently practiced by the FBI. Viewed as “the healing process” by many in the law enforcement field, this where the employee and the employer begin to take control of the problem. Although an overwhelming majority of managers indicated that they have no formal means of training to identify stress, sixty eight per cent reported that the agency has an employees assistance program of some type in place. For many law enforcement managers, the term “employee assistance” can be confusing. The term can be just as confusing for the employee as well, which is a major factor as to why many of the

programs go unutilized. It is important to note that there is a difference between employee discipline and employee punishment, and that employee assistance is altogether different. The title "Employee Assistance Programs" was coined by the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA); according to Masi (1984), it achieves two major purposes: "(1) It conveys that the program focuses on assisting employees, regardless of the type of problem from which they may suffer. (2) It avoids the stigma that may be attached to a more narrow program, specifically identified as for alcohol or drug problems" (p. 5). Although these programs are available to the majority of police agencies, it is not clear how often they are utilized.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Without stress in our lives, we could not live, but the excess of stress can be damaging, life threatening and fatal to the police officer of today. Recognizing stressors is the key to dealing with them and is paramount to intervention in matters that may elevate to dangerous levels. As was earlier hypothesized, a survey of twenty-four law enforcement agencies has indicated a need for development of better techniques to recognize and cope with stress among police officers in Texas.

Only twenty per cent of the current law enforcement managers working today get any formal training in a stress management or recognition of stress related problems in employees. Although more than ninety per cent of the agencies surveyed recognize a stress management program as being beneficial, less than thirty per cent have a program specifically designed to deal with this problem. In comparison to the eighty per cent who have reported having identified and approached an employee about stress related problems, it would seem that thirty per cent is a low number of agencies reacting to this ever-growing problem.

As was expected in the beginning of this research, an overwhelming majority of law enforcement managers recognize stress as a major problem in law enforcement. With over ninety per cent of the managers understanding that stress causes many different problems, it is concerning to find that less than thirty per cent take a proactive approach to this age old problem. The issue of police stress, substance abuse, and suicide has only recently started to gain notoriety and public attention. While no one profession or group of people are exempt from these three issues, the police profession is being plagued in pandemic proportion compared to other occupations. With this in mind, the understanding and coping with stress related issues becomes high on the list of priorities for law enforcement managers of today. Because all members of the agency can be affected by this dilemma, as well as members of the community, law enforcement professionals should take a more aggressive stance towards intervening and assisting employees with stress related problems. Coming together for a common cause, good mental and emotional health, will be beneficial for all of law enforcement as well as the communities they serve.

## REFERENCES

- Anshel, M. H. (2000). A conceptual model and implications for coping with stressful events in police work. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 27(3), 375-376.
- Brewer, N. Wilson, C., & Beck, K. (1994). Supervisory behavior and team performance among police patrol sergeants. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 67, 69-78.
- Ellison, K., & Glenz, J. (1983). *Stress and the police officer*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas
- Evans, B. J., & Coman, G. J. (1992). The worst part of the job. *Police Review*, 96, 968-969.
- Hurrell, J., Jr. (1995). *Stress and well-being at work*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Lazarus, R.S. (1999). *Stress & Emotion: A New Synthesis*, New York, New York: Springer Publishing Company
- Loo, R. (1986). Suicide Among Police in a Federal Force. *Canada's Mental Health*. 9, 379.
- Masi, D.A. (1984). *Designing Employee Assistance Programs*. New York: American Management Associations
- McCrae, R.R., (1999). The full five-factor model and well-being. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 26, 56.
- Nordlicht, S. (1979) Effects of stress on the police officer and family. *New York State Journal of medicine* 3, 400-401.
- Selye, H. (1974). *Stress without distress*. New York: J. B. Lippincott.
- Sheehan, D.C. (1999). Stress Management in the Federal Bureau of Investigation: Principles for Program Development. *International Journal of Emergency Mental Health* 1, 39.

Violanti, J., & Aron, F. (1993). Sources of police stressors, job attitudes and psychological distress. *Psychological Reports*, 72, 899-904.