

LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

STRESSORS FOR MANAGERS

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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| What Is Stress? | 2 |
| Management of Stress | 3 |
| Sources of Stress for Police Managers | 4 |
| Independence | 5 |
| Resources | 6 |
| Excellence..... | 6 |
| Subculture | 7 |
| Lack of Supervisory Training | 8 |
| Conflict | 8 |
| Policies and Procedures | 9 |
| Community Demands | 10 |
| Courts and Government Regulations | 10 |
| Physical Fitness | 11 |
| Reactions to Stress | 12 |
| Warning Signs | 15 |
| Reducing Stress from Within | 16 |
| Summary | 17 |
| End Notes | 19 |
| Bibliography | 21 |

Introduction

Over the past decade the journals in the area of law enforcement have increasingly concentrated on the issue of police stress. The literature abounds with accounts of the mental and physical health destroying results that occur from a career in law enforcement.

Long lists of potential stressors ranging from public apathy and an ineffective court system, to being a witness daily to man's inhumanity have been compiled. The basic theme of this manner of conceptualizing police stress is that due to the nature of the job, the officer is bombarded with constant frustration, negativity and inappreciativeness that leads to an experiencing of the stress reaction and consequently the diseases of adaptation.

Many agencies have devoted vast resources and employed a variety of techniques to aid their personnel to deal with the phenomenon of police stress. However, in many instances, police managers or administrators have not been the targeted population of these programs. While the education process has been widespread, the needs of many personnel have not been met and in our ever changing society, there is still progress to be made.

A survey of law enforcement training needs, in over 16,000 jurisdictions, conducted by the Institutional Research and Development Unit of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (F.B.I.), revealed that of "127 law enforcement functions, the number one expressed need identified was the handling of personal stress."¹ As society is continuing to change rapidly, crime is continuing to rise in most jurisdictions, and resources are limited within the public sector. The need of ongoing, continual stress management training for administrators is ever increasing.

What is Stress?

Police officers may begin their careers as healthy persons. Often they must pass rigid physical and psychological testing to qualify for police work. Yet as an occupational group, the health of police officers deteriorates rapidly. Certainly, the profession has associated risks of injury and death that partially explain why police officers suffer an early history of ill health. But there are other occupations, such as fire-fighting, that are also dangerous, yet those practitioners do not display the health problems experienced by police officers. Why then do many officers develop serious health problems at a relatively early age? Indeed, why are so many officers required to retire early?

Stress has, for many years, been a mystery to many individuals, including law enforcement personnel. Recently, while attending Module I of the Law Enforcement Management Institute at Texas A&M University, we participated in a session dealing with stress and stress management. During our initial class meeting, we were asked to explain what stress is. Of the variety of answers to this complex question, all were from a negative perspective. However, in a short period of time, we realized that we were only taking one view of the issue. Stress is composed of both positive and negative events and has been defined as "the non-specific response of the body to any demand placed on it."²

As was evident from this class discussion, the perception of stress by these thirty-five managers and administrators from across the state was from a negative aspect. The point or fact that is instrumental in any discussion or study of stress is that "perception is the most important key with regards to one's stress reaction."³ Just as the death of a loved one is

stressful, so is the birth of a child. The same analogy is applicable to marriage and divorce, as well as promotion versus not being promoted. The pressures of daily life, like waiting in line when in a hurry, add up and can eventually cause as much stress as major life changes.

During the course of our lives, our perceptions of events are learned behaviors, as are our reactions to these situations. How one individual learns to perceive a situation can be different from another's. Our life experiences are reflected in our perception of a situation.

This results in personnel within the agency, as is true for the community and society, perceiving and reacting to the same situation in different ways. In a law enforcement agency, the perceptions demonstrated by the chief, management and first line supervisors will set the tone for the entire agency and affect their responses. A wide variety of events can be perceived as stressful and these perceptions are a product of our entire life experience. Stress can be the result of a single event, but it is more often the result or product of our life-styles.

Management of Stress

All too often, police officers as well as police administrators are resistant to stress management training. Many officers are under the presumption that they could be considered weak or unable to meet the many challenges that we all must face. "The resistance that police officers sometimes display with stress management training results from the conflict between managing stress and the attraction to, and excitement associated with, police work."⁴ Stress management does not teach officers to be uninvolved or not

to be motivated. It provides officers with the necessary training and how to make the experience a positive one whenever possible. The appropriate response or reaction to stressful situations is an art that often times must be taught to police personnel during formal training sessions. Once these appropriate responses have been learned, they should be reinforced by management and supervisory personnel in order to insure that they are effectively utilized during emergency situations.

Another key to stress management for all personnel is appropriate mental preparation. Practicing or imagining the situation is an effective means of mental preparation. Not only does this reduce an individual's stress prior to and during threatening situations, but it will also help to reduce the possibility or potential for errors. Additionally, by examining what the desired results of an incident are, individuals can remain focused on a positive outcome and reduce the possibility of confrontation. While the situations in which this principle can be applied will vary from officer to officer and individual to individual, it can be effective.

Sources of Stress for Police Managers

During the research and study of stress and stress management for law enforcement executives and supervisors, it revealed, "that work ambiguity and work overload are major concerns, with community relations, relations with supervisors and subordinates, and work conflict,"⁵ also of concern.

During the research and study, it also revealed, "that police administrators and supervisors were experiencing stress problems that were different from those experienced by patrolman, yet equally menacing."⁶

These sources of stress are far from a complete or comprehensive listing of the stressors for administrators. As individual supervisors, managers, agencies and communities differ, so do the factors and events that cause stress. While a complete list of every source or cause of stress for a law enforcement manager would be impossible to compile, several sources are more universal than others. In the subsequent information, several sources of stress for administrators will be identified. As in any effective stress management program, the cause must be identified in order to implement an effective management program.

Independence

As patrol officers working the street, we learned to be independent and rely on ourselves, or a fellow officer for support. As an administrator, manager or supervisor, we can no longer utilize just ourselves or our partner to meet the demands of an administrative position. As an effective administrator, "... one must learn to depend on subordinates and support staff to accomplish the defined mission."

While in smaller agencies, the ability to delegate assignments to other personnel may be limited by the agency size, managers in larger agencies definitely must rely on others as they have never needed to before. It is no longer sufficient for the individual supervisor, manager or administrator to complete the task properly, it is his or her responsibility to insure that their subordinates do so as well. The independent nature of administration can cause stress for a new manager and cause the individual to be less effective in their new role.

Resources

Patrol officers, detectives and support personnel generally concern themselves with the equipment and resources needed to properly complete a given day. When resources are in low supply, or equipment is in need of repair or replacement, they simply notify a supervisor. Thus, administrators as well as supervisors must be aware of the availability of needed resources for a team, section or division of personnel. While the type and nature of equipment and resources utilized by personnel is not difficult to determine, the limited funds available to provide the resources with which to combat crime are becoming harder and harder to provide. This balancing test is becoming more and more difficult to accomplish. Law enforcement administrators must manage in a more cost effective, efficient manner and to do so can be a frustrating, stressful situation.

Excellence

The demand for excellence is one of the many traits that is common among police administrators. This demand stems from many sources, one of which is the necessity of complete accuracy in our daily work.

Additionally, the governmental units which govern our activity will not accept anything less, "In police work, excellence is expected, not rewarded."⁸ This can and does result in a rather stressful working environment for the police manager, supervisor and line officers. In an effort to combat this stressor, managers must insure that they recognize their personnel for their efforts. To be recognized by a fellow officer or supervisor is one of the most gratifying events any officer can experience. The extra efforts of line

personnel are not rewarded and frustration and stress can build. The rewards do not have to be formal or official, simply writing a personal note of thanks can often times remedy a situation.

Line supervisors play a key role in the daily routine of the police officer. Supervision is an essential part of the administration that permits the officer in the field to properly perform his assignment within the framework of departmental policy and procedure. The line supervisor must possess technical skills as well as knowledge of human relations. The quality and personality of a supervisor influence the work performance of his or her subordinates.

Subculture

Police officers generally associate and socialize with other law enforcement officers. "The ability to associate off duty with one who has shared similar life experiences and who generally views the profession on a similar manner contribute to the maintenance of police subculture." This often times results in the isolation of police personnel and their families from friendships outside of the law enforcement community. While this association can build very strong, deep rooted friendships, problems may arise if an officer is promoted, a strain may be placed upon the officer. The friendships -- and in some cases, antagonisms -- developed during this period can understandably interfere with a supervisor's ability to impartially perform his tasks.

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In a larger agency, a new or different subculture may exist. However, newly appointed supervisory personnel may not be readily accepted into this new group. In smaller agencies, no subculture or peer support system may be available. "The lack of someone with whom you can talk -- a sudden limitation on the brotherhood of the badge -- can be one of the greatest shocks of promotion."¹⁰ The loss or diminishment of an officer's support system to aid them during this stage of their career can be a deterrent to the efficiency or effectiveness of the officer in a new position.

Lack of Supervisory Training

In many law enforcement agencies, patrol officers and detectives are the personnel who receive a vast amount of the training provided. Good management training is not provided to the administrators who are given the responsibility of running the department. As we are all aware, the requirements associated with administering a law enforcement agency requires a vast amount of knowledge, training and experience.

Without effective preparation, training and education newly appointed supervisors are incapable of meeting the demands placed on them. Management should insure that quality training is provided to all supervisory personnel. The individuals who are promoted are excellent officers, but management and supervision require totally different skills and abilities.

Conflict

Supervisors are like all other law enforcement professionals and strive to be the most effective, efficient leaders in the organization. In their quest for excellence, it is easy to lose sight of the goals and objectives of the

organization. Officers who have worked together for extended periods of time as patrol officers differ once in a supervisory role. "The conflicts within ranks and between ranks can become a major source of stress."¹¹ Many first line supervisors and middle managers feel pulled in two directions during the day-to-day business of supervising personnel. They experience pressure, problems and even in some instances, demands from people they supervise. They also experience the pressure and demands imposed by their supervisors. In many ways, first line supervisors are in one of the most frustrating positions within the department. Couple with this the fact that they are generally eager to succeed, anxious to complete an assignment to the best of their ability and take personal responsibility for mistakes of their personnel, it is easy to see how stressors in this situation can mount.

Policies and Procedures

Policies, procedures and rules or regulations that are outdated, inadequate or are not the practice of the department create stress for supervisors and managers. Additionally, any unwritten policies, procedures or regulations cause stress for the law enforcement manager or administrator. In either situation, management is not in control, nor are they properly leading their personnel.

The lack of adequate regulations or guidelines for the conduct of an agency's officers can be potentially devastating to the organization. Imposing another agency's standards can be just as devastating to an organization. Each individual agency needs to devise and implement policies, procedures, rules and regulations based upon the needs of their organization and the expectations of their community. A lack of adequate guidelines

can create stress as was revealed in a 1980 study which states, ". . . departmental policy was a contributing factor to supervisory stress."¹² Through well established regulations, the management team can work to eliminate this source of stress.

Community Demands

As our society has continued to change and with an overall increasing crime rate in most communities, many special interest groups have evolved. These citizen groups demand and expect prompt solutions to often times unique problems. To these groups, other demands placed upon the agency by the community are not of concern as they expect solutions or at least proactive enforcement to resolve their problem. Administrators must find a means to balance these demands and still be responsible to the community.

~~The~~ community pressure to assure professionalization of police service, prevent discriminatory or abusive practices, and to provide prompt and complete response to citizens have increased pressure on and expectations directed toward administrators."¹³ Administrators must insure that the expectations of the community to these problem situations are handled in a prompt, professional and efficient manner.

Courts and Government Regulations

Outside agencies who possess the authority to impose regulations and requirements on a department can be a stressor for the administrators and subsequently, the rank and file of a police department. While administrators

have limited control over these organizations, open communication can be an effective means of resolving the problem situations that arise. When communication between agency managers is strained or non-existent, tension, and thus stress, often times results.

When the government imposes regulations on an agency, such as the Federal Fair Labor Standards Act, administrators must move quickly to resolve the uncertainty created by new or different standards. Failure to do so results in rumors and speculation that is detrimental to morale and the efficient operation of the department.

Physical Fitness

A 1988 study reported that "law enforcement supervisory personnel, when compared to a non-law enforcement population of the same age, have an increased diastolic blood pressure 10% above the control group."¹⁴ The article reporting this condition did not indicate the numbers involved in the experimental and control groups. This is just one of the many possible health problems that can result from a more sedentary life-style that often characterizes a supervisory or management position. Physical fitness programs are needed in the law enforcement profession but they are not yet universally adopted. In addition to reduction in blood pressure that can result from physical exercise, many other health related benefits occur when a fitness program is followed.

Every year, many police officers across the country are killed as a result of a suspect overpowering them and taking their weapon. While the lack of physical conditioning is not always the primary cause, it is a major contributing factor. The benefits of being physically fit go beyond the work

environment and result in a higher quality of health and life. Management personnel should develop and implement a physical fitness program that meets the needs of their individual officers and the department as well.

Reactions to Stress

Some of the common defense mechanisms used by everyone to cope with stress include laughing, crying, cursing, boasting, overactivity, and day dreaming.

When tension is not relieved, the individual experiences growing discomfort, anxiety, and feelings of uselessness. Guilt and fears intensify. There is a steadily increasing inability to perform work or relate with others, which may be concealed at great inner cost to the individual.

Some of the more specific, but less extreme, stress reactions among police officers include repression of emotion, displacement of anger, isolation and unspoken fears.

Repression of Emotion - From the beginning of their law enforcement careers, police officers are trained to control their emotions under all conditions including extremely stressful events that naturally elicit emotion from humans. In time of action, police officers must avoid showing anger, disgust, weakness, or sadness. Officers learn to stifle these emotions because of the necessity to make clearheaded, split-second decisions. This enables officers to face their work -- battered children, hit-and-run victims, belligerent drunks, homicide victims, and perhaps the most stressful of all, hostile citizenry.

Eventually any show of emotion, even when off duty, may make a police officer uncomfortable. He or she may build a psychological wall that will prevent revealing emotions. Sometimes the officer cannot lower his emotional defenses regardless of circumstances, and may carry a robot-like image home where the family must cope with an individual who is more "police officer" than parent or spouse. While it may appear that officers have rid themselves of all emotion, in reality they only hide emotion.

Displacement of Anger - Law enforcement agencies have a basic paramilitary structure. Orders, often given during emergencies, are accepted without the opportunity of debate in most cases. When an assignment is given, police officers frequently do not have time to question its reasonableness, disagree with specific instructions, or refuse to act as told -- even though they may question the directive. Thus, supervisors may become a serious source of anger at times, but such anger cannot be vented within the police agency.

An unexpressed disagreement with supervisors is not the only source of this type of frustration. The ability to say or do what is felt, to act out the emotions freely, is also limited in dealing with the public. No matter how disgusting or abusive some people may be, the officer's anger and other emotions have to be under tight control.

Isolation - Most police contacts are made either in emergency situations or under conditions where citizens may resent the presence or symbolic authority of the police. As a result, many police officers gradually come to consider all citizens as obstacles in performing their duties. At that point,

all citizens are perceived as potential threats to the well-being of the officer. With such an attitude, police officers find it difficult to communicate with anyone outside of the profession.

Even within the family unit, police officers are often unable to express their true feelings. These officers believe that only fellow officers can understand and appreciate their problems. Accordingly, an officer's concern about his frustrations, abilities, and possible errors on the job may be discussed only with other officers.

The police officers who share important feelings only with other officers receive feedback and direction from only one source, a source whose views are usually the same. Thus, the police officer is not exposed to different ideas or perspectives. In turn, the officer's family comes to view him as a one-dimensional person.

Unspoken Fears - The almost continuous psychological stress that ~~some police officers~~ experience on the job is often complicated by an inability ~~or unwillingness~~ to discuss openly their personal feelings. Although officers ~~may~~ talk about occupational and personal problems among themselves, two ~~subjects~~ are ~~often~~ ignored in their discussions. One is fear of injury or death, and the second is personal feelings of sympathy and pity for the deprived and victimized ~~whom~~ they encounter each day. Officers feel uncomfortable ~~talking~~ about these matters among themselves because others may interpret these concerns as an indication of over-sensitivity and weakness.

Officers are frequently reluctant to discuss these matters with family members, too. They sometimes believe that the details of anxiety-provoking workday experiences, if expressed at home, will create problems for the spouses. Often cited examples of the types of events that officers tend to

withhold are tragic situations such as accidents or death, particularly those that involve young children, threats on their lives, and hostile reactions from within the community.

When officers feel that they cannot express their intense personal feelings at work or at home, they may redirect these feelings typically in a destructive manner toward others, or they may not express themselves in any fashion. In either case, the officer's inability to release his or her feelings constructively will lead to anxieties and increase his or her problems.

Warning Signs

Stress has a cumulative effect upon the person. Job stress can affect one's health, and one's home life. Before stress-associated health problems appear, certain personality characteristics and behavior patterns may ~~signal an officer's inability~~ to deal with the stress of the job. The items on the following list are possible but not absolute indicators of excessive stress:¹⁵

- Abrupt change in typical behavior pattern
- Rapid mood changes
- Overly suspicious
- Excessive use of alcohol
- Overhostility
- Extreme defensiveness
- Frequent illness
- Excessive nervous habits
- Accident prone

- Taking of unnecessary chances
- Obsessive about working
- Sleep disturbances
- Decrease in work performance
- Depression
- Excessive use of violence

Reducing Stress from Within

Obviously, there are many sources of stress for law enforcement administrators, managers, and supervisors. This list is as long and varied, simple and complex, as the individuals who assume these positions of responsibility. However, there are means that an administrator can employ to reduce the potential for stressors within the agency.

By reducing the potential for stressful situations, the administrator can, to a limited degree, reduce the stressors that originate within the department. The most visible method is to provide stress management training to all department personnel, with an emphasis on first line supervisors. This training should provide first line supervisory personnel with the necessary skills to recognize when one of the officers under their supervision is experiencing abnormal pressures and the skills to effectively handle the problem. Should the supervisor not be in a position to provide sufficient help to remedy the problem, the officer should be encouraged to seek confidential help. "By providing and encouraging confidential access to family and personal health agencies outside of the department, the agency can help to minimize situations before they become a problem."¹⁶

Shift, district, and supervisory rotation can also cause stress. "Changing shifts is disruptive to home life, eating and sleeping patterns and limits the interaction an officer can have with his or her family."¹⁷ "Rotation of supervisory personnel decreases efficiency of the individual officer as well as the officer's supervisors."¹⁸ While limited shift and supervisory rotation may be a sound organizational practice, management personnel should carefully evaluate the practices they employ and balance the organizational needs with a stress reduction program.

A personal manner in which a supervisor or administrator can reduce stress within the organization is through open, friendly communication. Formal communication occurs on a regular basis and is a necessary component to the job. However, a personal handwritten note, acknowledging outstanding work performance, is an excellent tool to recognize personnel in a less formal, yet effective manner. The means or method a manager utilizes to reduce stress is not as important as the end result, as long as the act is effective.

Summary

Stress and stress management for law enforcement officials has been extensively researched and studied during the decade of the 1980's. Some researchers indicate that law enforcement is the most stressful profession, citing high divorce rate, suicide and alcohol percentages. Other researchers indicate that it is the type of person, not the profession that causes the problems. The perception that law enforcement is a stressful profession is

a problem that all administrators or supervisors should address. The fact is clear that if an individual perceives that they are under stress, they will demonstrate behaviors indicative of such. Supervisory personnel are subject to different types of stress or stressors and can experience difficulties in adequately handling these problems.

What is stressful to one, may not be to another and there is no definitive means to identify those stressors. To combat the potential for this type of problematic situation, all supervisory and management personnel should receive stress management training.

End Notes

¹ Bruce German and John Carr, "Stress Management for the Police Community," The National Sheriff (February - March 1988, p. 26.

² Hens Salye, Stress Without Distress (New York: J. B. Lippincott (o., 1974), p. 14; Quoted in James T. Reese and Deborah K. Bright, "Stress Management: A Proactive Approach," The National Sheriff (June - July 1982).

³ James T. Reese and Deborah K. Bright, "Stress Management: A Proactive Approach," Behavioral Science in Law Enforcement, 1987, p. 47.

⁴ Lee Colwell, "Stress - A Major Enemy of Law Enforcement Professionals," FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin (February 1988), p.12.

⁵ James D. Sewell, "The Boss as a Victim," FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin (February 1988), p. 16.

⁶ Leonard Territo and Harold J. Vetter, Stress and Police Personnel (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1981), p. 181.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ James T. Reese, "Minority Stress: The Police Executive," Behavioral Science in Law Enforcement, 1987, p.61.

⁹ James D. Sewell, Ph.D., op. cit., p. 18.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Norvell, Belles, Hills, "Perceived Stress Levels and Physical Symptoms in Supervisory Law Enforcement Personnel," Journal of Police Science and Administration, Volume 16, No. 2, 1988, p. 75.

¹³ James D. Sewell, Ph.D., op. cit., p. 18.

¹⁴ Norvell, Belles, Hill, op. cit., p. 75.

¹⁵ Leonard Territo and Harold J. Vetter, Stress and Police Personnel. Massachusetts; Allyn and Baron, Inc., 1981.

¹⁶ Francis L. McCafferty, M. D., "Lessening Stress on the Police Department," The Police Chief, (February 1989), p. 31.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

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