

**LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE**

**LAW ENFORCEMENT OCCUPATIONAL  
STRESS AND SUICIDE**

**A RESEARCH PAPER  
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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
MODULE III**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
STRESS DEFINED . . . . .	3
MAJOR SOURCES OF STRESS IN LAW ENFORCEMENT . . . . .	5
The Police Organization . . . . .	5
Administration . . . . .	7
Lack of Public Support . . . . .	9
Personal Problems . . . . .	10
Family Life . . . . .	13
INDIRECT SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR . . . . .	14
CONTROL MECHANISMS OF STRESS . . . . .	18
Reduction/Elimination of Stress . . . . .	19
Handling Stress . . . . .	19
Peer Assistance Program . . . . .	21
Fitness For Duty Evaluation . . . . .	22
Training Program Supervisors and Administrators . . . . .	23
CONCLUSION . . . . .	24
END NOTES . . . . .	26
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	31

## **LAW ENFORCEMENT OCCUPATIONAL**

### **STRESS AND SUICIDE**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The family sits and mourns, wondering what happened to the bright, eager young man that was going to be the best police officer the city had ever seen. He was going to rid the city of crime and drug abuse and send these crooks to jail.

One cold January day in 1985, John, a bright young man, walked through the Police Academy doors ready and eager to take on the challenges of police work. Through his academic and physical training he excelled with high honors and was shown great respect by not only his peers but his superiors. John graduated from the police academy with honors. After graduation John was assigned a partner and they hit it off great. Then something happened; John started seeing brutality, rights violations and cover ups. Supervisors allowed officers to falsify reports, to cover up the false arrests and the beatings.

After seven years John had reached "stress overload" and "burnout" occurred. He had been worn down and Indirect Self-Destructive Behavior began. John began drinking on the job, coming to work with a hangover and taking drugs to counter act his fatigue and drowsiness. He also began taking unnecessary risks by running into dangerous situations without evaluating the consequences placing not only himself but fellow officers in jeopardy.

John's family life was starting to crumble. This was caused by John's lack of presence around the family, non- participation in family outings, abusing alcohol and being quick tempered and abusive toward family members when he was at home.

John finally reached the end of his rope and decided he was not worth anything. He took his life by the one thing that was suppose to protect him and life itself, his service weapon.

What could the Police Administrators, the peers and the public have done to prevent this tragedy from occurring? John may have been helped if someone would have recognized the Indirect Self-Destructive Behavior that he was displaying. This behavior is characterized by stress overload and burnout caused by:

...curious melange of false assumptions, misguided good intentions, moral paradoxes, ethical ambiguities, impossible demands, and outright lies that has shaped our expectations of police officers. Cops are hired to fight rime crooks, make our streets safe. But all too often they are told to do their jobs in such a way as to guarantee failure. Fight crime, yes, but do so politely, cautiously, without stepping on toes. Make our streets safe, to be sure, but also be there when we need consoling after our homes are burglarized, when we have spats with our spouses, when the neighbor's dog is digging up our flower beds. Risk your lief, of course, but be careful when you decide to shoot back. And accept the designation as one of the city's finest, but don't expect respect.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to help police managers become aware of the issues surrounding police job stress and the resulting behavior that may occur if proper coping mechanisms are not utilized by their officers. Psychological programs that can be instituted by police agencies to aid stressed officers will be discussed.

### **STRESS DEFINED**

Stress can be defined in several ways. Selye defines stress as, the non-specific response of the body to any demand placed on it.<sup>2</sup> Greenberg defines stress as "the combination of a stressor and stress reactivity."<sup>3</sup> Another definition of stress that is offered by Stotland and

Pendleton is "the state of the individual when in a situation that is perceived to tax or exceed abilities or resources."<sup>4</sup>

Science has also defined stress as it relates to physical objects.

The engineering definition of stress is:

... an external force directed at some physical object. The result of the stress is strain, that is the temporary or permanent alteration in the structure of the object. Stress is the stimulus condition that causes disequilibrium in the system and thereby produces a dynamic kind of strain. The strain, in turn triggers changes in the system aimed at restoring the original state of equilibrium. This engineering definition of stress also applies when dealing with the human body.<sup>5</sup>

For the purpose of this paper Fishken's definition will be used.

Fishken defines stress as any demand, internal, external or both that causes a person to mentally and/or physically readjust his sense of balance.<sup>6</sup>

A term used frequently when discussing stress is stressors. Stressors are those events that cause stress.<sup>7</sup> Stressors can include everyday events such as sleeping through the alarm, getting caught in a traffic jam, or having several different people demand your attention at one time. Other stressors can be rare events such as death in the family, or being laid off from a job. According to Albrecht, a stressor can be

physical, social, or emotional.<sup>8</sup> Physical stressors may include excessive heat or cold, constant noise, and being shot. Transactions with spouses, co-workers, customers, or supervisors are examples of social stressors. Emotional stressors include events such as the perception of danger, upcoming deadlines, or the expectation of rejection.

### **MAJOR SOURCES OF STRESS IN LAW ENFORCEMENT**

Police occupational stress can occur from a variety of sources. These sources can include: the lack of public support, personal problems, changing of shifts, inadequate or non-supportive management, conflict with other criminal justice agencies, and the potential for being injured or killed on the job.<sup>9</sup>

### **THE POLICE ORGANIZATION**

One of the major sources of stress in law enforcement is inadequate or non-supportive administration. Administrators have felt that an officer(s) is in a slump and will make a turn around, it is just a

matter of time. They have not looked at the problem as a stress factor, mentally or physically.

The law enforcement agency's paramilitary structure promotes the concept of power in leadership. Additionally, the rank system of that power makes open communication difficult for the average officer.<sup>10</sup> The issuance of an order means that the problem has been defined regardless of the officer's insight and experience - there is no room for questions or suggestions. It also means that the solution to the problem, or the statement of the police policy, is final - there is no room for negotiation. Law enforcement too frequently rely on rank, not wisdom.

Additional sources of administrative stress include the lack of proper equipment, equipment that does not work, and the excessive amount of paper work required. Much of the equipment used by police agencies today was purchased in the 1970's when the Law Enforcement Agency Assistance (LEAA) program funded the acquisition of this equipment. Unfortunately, most agencies have not replaced or upgraded this equipment. Repair of this equipment is becoming more expensive and technologically obsolete, therefore, as the equipment is wearing out it is not being repaired or replaced. The lack of up-to-date equipment

makes it difficult for officers to carry out their job mission. These effect the officer and the way the officer performs his job.

A law enforcement agency is by nature a negative organization. The administration does not provide positive feedback to officers on a regular basis. When officers receive nothing but negative feedback, hostility is created against the administrators.<sup>11</sup> This may also cause police officers to fear that they will not be backed by the administration.

Frequently, an officer must make a split-second decision on the street which then places the officer in a situation where there may be a future hearing to decide whether his actions were proper or not.<sup>12</sup> These hearings may cause additional stress for the officer as he must defend his actions to others. Additionally, the police administration may have decided not to make a decision about the appropriateness of the actions until after the hearings, therefore, not providing the officer with any support during the hearings.

### ADMINISTRATION

Line officers identify the largest portion of their stress as coming from within the organization. The stressors are centered around issues

of professionalism, such as: management, supervisory practices, and poor supervisors. Studies conducted by Band and Manuele, Coman and Evans, Crank and Caldero, and White and Marino reports police officers listed unsatisfactory personnel evaluations, being passed over for promotions, supervisors not supportive of the officer, perception that upper-management personnel are out of touch with what is occurring on the streets, and over supervision as being stressful.<sup>13</sup>

These stressors reveal that the stress perceived by line officers is most often attributed to supervisors and management.<sup>14</sup> This may lead one to believe that the stress perceived by the police supervisors and management may also originate from their supervisors. If this is in fact happening, then the stress the police experience may be organizational in nature.

The officer's work activities is also a primary source of stress for line officers.<sup>15</sup> These factors can include lack of control over the amount of work that is performed, non-participation in decisions concerning procedures and methods used in their work, and lack of control over events that occur at work. The workload of the police agency is primarily based upon calls that are received. Job overload consists of two

components: quantity and quality. Quantity job overload is having too much work to do. Quality job overload is demands being made that are beyond an officer's ability to fulfill. The quantity of work on the job is not controllable because of the demands from the community, but the increase of personnel may ease the workload of the individual officers. The quality of work can be solved by training the officer to handle each individual situation to the best of his ability and stop trying to be a perfectionist.

The courts are also perceived by line officers as a stressor.<sup>16</sup> The officers feel the courts are too lenient towards offenders, and do not understand the victims. Court appearances may interfere with scheduled days off.

#### LACK OF PUBLIC SUPPORT

The public perceives police officers as invincible heroes. Citizens expect prompt solutions to unique problems.<sup>17</sup> They want assurance of the professionalism of police service, prevent non-discriminatory and non-abusive practices, and to provide prompt and complete response to citizen requests.

The police officers consider their function as helping citizens, however, they find themselves as a part of a group that is feared, disliked, hated, or even assaulted in the performance of these services.<sup>18</sup>

The experience of meeting with indifference, to outright hostility of the public towards the police officer, may eventually result in the feeling of isolation and the development of an us against them attitude. To continue to work proficiently the police officer may change his personality and become hardened and cynical.

The sheer volume of incidents that law enforcement officers respond to causes them not to get emotionally involved with the people or problems they encounter. This emotional distance of the officer is seen by many as uncaring. This image causes many citizens to be critical of the officer, as well as creating "incongruity between job related objectives and real human emotions."<sup>19</sup>

### PERSONAL PROBLEMS

The police officer encounters life threatening situations, burglars, murderers, family violence and hostages. Capps reports that a study of police officers in Virginia found that the typical officer is exposed to an

injured adult three times each month, a severe assault victim every 45 days, and a dead person every three months.<sup>20</sup> A police officer sees brutal beatings, mangled bodies and innocent children sexually abused and battered, but with his tough COP IMAGE he shows no emotion. This is part of the myth of the police image. These myths are part of the law enforcement culture and also society's stereotyped perceptions of police officers. As an officer is assimilated into the police culture, he strives to maintain an image of invulnerability and moral superiority. The training that the officer undergoes may include viewing himself as physical and emotionally able to handle any crisis without being personally affected.<sup>21</sup>

As the officer does not display emotions when faced with adverse situations, stress from these events can accumulate. Unless the officer begins to deal with this job stress, he will show personality and behavior pattern changes. Some possible changes in personality and behavior patterns include:

- Abrupt change in typical behavior pattern
- Rapid mood change

- Excessive use of alcohol
- Over-hostile (Temperament or actions)
- 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<sup>22</sup>

If an officer is exhibiting one or more of these behaviors, that officer may be experiencing stress overload and may need the assistance of a counseling program. To assist the officer and to avoid liability suits which may result from actions of the officer, supervisory and management personnel of the police agency must be able to identify the changes early and make assistance available to the officer.

A serious concern in police agencies is the use and abuse of alcohol and other drugs. The use of alcohol and other drugs can be the result of stress which is experienced on the job, as well as, the acceptability of alcohol consumption by others in the profession. It is estimated that 25 percent of all police officers have a serious alcohol dependence.<sup>23</sup> Dietrich found that the average officer reported that he consumed alcohol on the job at least seven days every six months.<sup>24</sup> With this level of reported alcohol use, police management must become concerned about the ability of their officers to perform the job. "Stress may be an important determinant of alcohol use. Police officers are typically symptomatic drinkers. Those who drink for relief of psychological strain. Stress is significantly related to escapist drinking."<sup>25</sup> Education and the availability of programs which are sanctioned by the police department are needed to avoid liability issues and other consequences due to a police officers use of alcohol.

### FAMILY LIFE

Police work can have a negative effect on family life. Officers frequently feel they do not spend enough time with their children and

miss social events with their family. The officer and his family has to deal with constant life and death situations, potential bodily injury and public negativeness and apathy. These contribute to create the high risk lifestyle family.<sup>26</sup>

The officer may become suspicious and antagonistic towards others in effort to avoid recurrence of an injury or a similar incident. These feelings soon become part of the home life which result in arguments and other problems. The officer may start showing hostility and suspiciousness, therefore, may have trouble in interpersonal relationships.

Neidig, Russell and Seng found that 40 percent of the surveyed officers reported that within the past year, they were involved in at least one incident of physical aggression during a marital conflict. Another eight percent of the male officers reported severe violence with a marital partner at the sometime of the relationship.<sup>27</sup>

...the significant relationships found between work related variables such as current assignment, shift and hours worked per week, and marital aggression, suggest that marital violence in law enforcement officer families can be understood, at least in part, as a function of the unique demands of the profession and the specific working conditions experienced in discharging those responsibilities.<sup>28</sup>

Some of the more common complaints concerning the effect of police work on family life are; not being able to spend time with their children, missing social events, poor public image of police which affects family members, taking the job home, being hard to live with, rotating shifts, and the loss of non-police friendships.<sup>29</sup>

#### **INDIRECT SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR (ISDB-SUICIDE)**

After a stressor occurs, reaction to the stressor begins. Selye describes reaction to stress as a three-phase process. This process, called the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS), occurs when a person is exposed to a stressor, or stressors, over a period of time.<sup>30</sup>

The initial reaction to a stressor is the fight or flight response, both of which can increase muscle tension, heart rate, and blood pressure, as well as, other physiological reactions.<sup>31</sup> If these products of stress continue to build, the second stage of GAS, resistance, is entered. In this stage the body reacts to fight the stressor. Continued stress can lead to both physiological disorder and emotional instability. These can include: coronary heart disease, migraine headaches, nightmares, gastrointestinal problems, insomnia, an inability to concentrate, irritability,

a feeling of being keyed up all of the time, ulcers, tension headaches and temporomandibular (TAJ) syndrome, among other illnesses and manifestations.

If the stressor continues and the person can not adapt, the third GAS stage is reached. This stage is called exhaustion. Selye describes this stage as the body running out of adaptive energy.<sup>32</sup> When this happens the person experiences general exhaustion, followed by death.

Too much work or frequent frustration at work can lead to a syndrome of physical and emotional exhaustion, "BURNOUT". Burnout is defined as "an adverse work stress reaction with psychological, psychophysiological, and behavior components."<sup>33</sup> This would correspond to being in an advanced stage two and stage three of Selye's GAS. Moreover, burnout appears to be a major factor in low worker morale, high absenteeism and job turnover rates, physical illness and distress, increased alcohol and drug use, marital and family conflict, and various psychological problems.

Symptoms of burnout include the following:

1. Diminished sense of humor
2. Skipping rest and food breaks

3. Increase in overtime and no vacation
4. Increased physical complaints
5. Social withdrawal
6. Changed job performance
7. Self medication (tranquilizers etc.)
8. Internal changes<sup>34</sup>

In addition, burnout may be characterized by pessimism, paranoia, rigidity, callousness, feelings of loneliness and guilt, and difficulty in making and explaining decisions.<sup>35</sup>

Burnout may lead to Indirect Self-Destructive Behavior (ISDB). Indirect self-destructive behavior can be defined as; potentially punitive risk taking, not rationally connected to positive achievement. ISDB is a readily available behavioral option for emotionally disturbed police officers, since risk taking is often part of the job. The risk taking becomes ISDB for police officers when it is compulsive and associated with depression. ISDB are characteristic of the suicidal officer, unexpressed high dependency needs, low self-esteem, and social isolation. Signs of suicidal intent are the making of a will, giving away personal items and overt instances of ISDB.<sup>36</sup>

With the high rate of chemical abuse in law enforcement officers, we also see a high rate of marital discord, higher than the normal rate of cardiovascular problems, "significantly higher rate of early death than the general population and a ranking of third among all occupations in suicide."<sup>37</sup> Another survey showed that the Police Officers in the United States rated second among 36 occupations, in the number of suicides committed.<sup>38</sup> In the City of New York in 1987, the New York Police Department reached a record level of 10 suicides within their department.<sup>39</sup>

Society demands that officers be "super cops," but they are not. Stress is caused by the psychological need to not admit that officers can have problems, by the natural tendency of officers to develop attitudes of suspicion and cynicism, and the experience dealing with death in brutal and emotional situations. Moreover officers themselves are constantly targets for death, since they run great risk of getting shot, stabbed, or murdered. Working under such conditions, it is no wonder that as an occupation, police work ranks high in rates of alcoholism, divorce, suicide and heart attack.<sup>40</sup>

### **CONTROL MECHANISMS OF STRESS**

As illustrated in the previous section, police officers experience stress from a variety of sources. The officer who does not utilize control mechanisms may experience burnout. Prior to reaching burnout, the officer's supervisors and peers should recognize the symptoms of stress overload and intervene so that the officer can once again become a fully functional, well police officer. Education about stress is needed so that the symptoms of stress can be identified and action taken. Police management can institute a program that will consist of educating officers and supervisors about stress and then instituting remedies for personnel that are experiencing stress.

### **REDUCTION/ELIMINATION OF STRESS**

To reduce and eliminate stress one needs to know the signs and causes. Education of stress, its sources and symptoms is needed if an evaluation is to be made of the major stressors (emotional and physical) and then prioritizing of them is done. After the stressors have been prioritized, procedures, programs and activities are put into action to alleviate and reduce the stress in police work. Follow-up and monitoring

of the progress and effectiveness of the program should be done to ensure that positive results occur due to the elimination and reduction of the stressors.<sup>41</sup>

### HANDLING STRESS

Training the individual officers concerning the symptoms, coping and knowledge of symptoms of stress in police work is very important.

The most frequent stress related symptoms are:

Anxiety-nervousness	Chest pains
Crying spells	Decreased sexual drive
Decreased temper control	Depression
Diarrhea	Dramatic weight increase or loss
Fatigue	Gastrointestinal complaints
Headaches	Increased drinking rate
Lowered motivation	Nightmares
Short-term memory disturbance	Skin rash
Sleep Disturbance	Suicidal ideation
Vomiting	Withdrawal <sup>42</sup>

Stress management techniques which have been proven to combat stress include; self-hypnosis, meditation, biofeedback, aerobic exercise, and progressive muscle relaxation.<sup>43</sup> There is research supporting both the physiological benefits and psychological benefits of such training.<sup>44</sup> The physiological benefits include reduced heart rate, blood pressure, and respiration rate. The psychological benefits include decrease in anxiety, lower tension levels and a reduction of fears and phobias.

### PEER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

A peer assistance program can be developed by training fellow officers and employees in peer counseling. This program can be used as a tool to assist fellow officers in remedying any physical, medical, emotional, or psychological problems that may effect job performance.<sup>45</sup>

Peer assistance and counseling may be very important in the police arena, as most police officers are suspicious of mental health professionals and are reluctant to seek their services. Police officers feel that "only another member of the police profession can understand their problems."<sup>46</sup> This illustrates that the use of peer counseling for police can be useful.

For peer assistance to work in-depth training of the counselors is needed so that they will help, not harm. This training should include basic counseling techniques and provide ample time to practice the newly acquired skills. The peer assistance program should have access to a professional consultant. Additionally, the officers providing the assistance meet on a regular basis to discuss problem areas, have ongoing training, and to be debriefed, so they do not experience stress overload.<sup>47</sup>

Confidentiality is of vital importance for the successful operation of a peer assistance program. Klyver states the following concerning confidentiality and the Los Angeles Police Department Peer Assistance Program:

In a police environment where suspiciousness commonly reaches paranoid dimensions, a peer counseling program would not survive very long if it were perceived to be a 'tool' for management to 'get the goods' on officers. Managers also need to be convinced that the program won't be used to cover up problems or to prevent them from doing their jobs.<sup>48</sup>

A peer assistance program should be given privileged communication status for all but criminal acts and serious misconduct incidents. The determination of what constitutes serious misconduct must be determined before the program is in operation.

#### FITNESS FOR DUTY EVALUATION

Fitness for duty evaluation is to assist officer(s) when their behavior poses a risk. The risk may be to the officer, the public, colleagues, property, or the reputation of the department. These risks could be caused by drug and/or alcohol abuse, obvious emotional disturbance, violence or threats of violence, poor judgement, and abuse of authority.

The counseling evaluation will help determine if the officer is physically and emotionally fit to return to duty.<sup>49</sup> Mental health professionals are needed for this assessment and counseling. This type of assessment is critical following trauma situations, such as; shootings, brutal deaths of children and severe officer injury.

#### TRAINING PROGRAM SUPERVISORS AND ADMINISTRATORS

A training program for supervisors and administrators to recognize stress in their subordinates is the backbone of any police department stress reduction program. All supervisors and administrators should be responsible to do the following:

- Watch for changes in the behavior, both personal and professional.
- Make note of increased use of sick time as well as the increased desire to work overtime.
- Note lapses in concentration, missed deadlines, and excessive fatigue.
- Watch for symptoms of alcohol and/or substance abuse.
- Listen to comments and complaints from peers.<sup>50</sup>

If a supervisor detects stress overload of his subordinates, he should provide them with feedback concerning the observations and

concerns that his behavior has created. Confrontation should be done privately and in a positive manner.

### **CONCLUSION**

The development of a stress recognition program in a police agency will require that many issues be addressed. Some of these issues are:

1. The appropriate role of the police psychologist.
2. Administrative commitment to stress management programs.
3. The moral and ethical responsibility of criminal justice managers for their personnel.
4. Increased, more realistic training.
5. The use of stress management programs as an "easy out" for incompetent or weak officers.
6. The balancing of on-the-job demands and professional expectations with off-the-job outlets.
7. The need for organizational reform.
8. The education of community governing bodies and citizens about their role in the stress management of public employees.
9. The identification and management of the stress of personnel beyond the line officer.<sup>51</sup>

Personnel representing all divisions and levels of the organization should be involved when developing the program. If line officers, as well as supervisors are involved in the creation of the program, the program will have a greater impact.

In the introduction the question was asked: What could the police administrators, the peers and the public have done to prevent this tragedy from occurring? With the proper training and knowledge in recognizing and dealing with stress and their symptoms, the administrators, peers, and public could have seen the signs of stress overload. Once recognized, assistance could have been offered to John in order to avoid the resulting tragedy.

The police profession is one of the most, if not the most stressful professions, with high divorce, suicide and alcohol abuse rates. Is it the type of individual that is the cause of these activities or is it the police profession? Whatever the answer, police administrators need to deal with the problem of stress through education and training at all levels within the organization if we are to decrease the number of officers suffering from stress and burnout.

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