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Stress Disorders in Law Enforcement Officers

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research paper is to show that the recognition of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is an extremely important issue facing today's police officer and law enforcement agencies. Police work has been recognized as the most stressful occupation in America. Left untreated and it can lead to officer overload. Symptoms can be sleep disorders, sexual dysfunction, substance abuse, feelings of guilt, depression, flashbacks, nightmares, and family problems. The results if left untreated are high blood pressure, heart attacks, stomach ulcers, divorces, and suicide.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder has been labeled many different names. "Soldier Heart" during the Civil War, "shell shock" during World War I, "battle fatigue" in World War II and "gross stress reaction" with the Korean War. Research in Vietnam War Veterans gave psychologist insight for establishing groundwork for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The law enforcement community has begun to recognize that the police officer can and will possibly experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Alcoholism, divorce and suicide are major factors in police work. Stress can be brought on by a traumatic event or personal difficulties. Marital discord, unpaid bills, and poor working conditions can all bring on stress. Combine these with a possible shooting death and you have an officer in trouble.

Law Enforcement must come up with policy and procedures to assist officers experiencing symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Supervisors should be trained to recognize symptoms and teams of trained people must be set up to assist officers in trouble. Confidentiality must be maintained if these officers are to come forward for help.

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Introduction

Stress experienced by police officers and the disorders it causes have gained recognition throughout the law enforcement community (Nielsen, 1986). When a police officer is under undue stress they cannot function well for their department. Stress caused from fatal accident scenes, assaults, manmade or natural disasters, shootings, and death of fellow officers, are events that the average citizen will never experience (Nielsen, 1986). This privilege is reserved for the men and women who make up our law enforcement communities. Police departments should be prepared to adequately meet each officer's need through early diagnosis and treatment.

The purpose of this paper is to encourage departments to recognize the symptoms of stress and post traumatic stress disorder. After learning to recognize symptoms departments should be encouraged to establish guidelines for traumatic incident debriefings. These guidelines should consist of but not be limited to, psychological services, peer counseling, employee assistance programs and the use of clergy. This paper will define stress and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It will name and discuss some of the causes of stress, particularly officer stress and how departments can suffer because of "stressed out" officers. The signs of stress as it relates to the law enforcement field. This researcher will show why it's important for a department to learn to recognize the signs of stress and why programs should be set so they can deal with the disorders caused by stress.

Studies show that police officers experience the same type of symptoms that veterans of wars have displayed after their return (Williams, 1995). People can experience certain tragic events in their lives and handle minimal amounts of stress. Placing our minds and bodies in the paths of emotional and drastic change produces stress. We must have a way to funnel the stress to keep from having emotional or physical breakdown. The requirements of a law enforcement

profession put an officer in harms way that cause problems with his or her families. This can produce high levels of stress that can make the officer withdraw from work and family or cause serious health problems.

Police Officers involved in a high-speed chases that cause injury to innocent motorist or other officers, often blame themselves. Accidents that kill children, or a whole family are hard to forget and could be a picture in a memory for a long time. Watching helplessly while someone dies, knowing you cannot help is a memory relived over and over again. Having to tell a family that a dad and husband will not be coming home because some drunk driver was not caught in time. All these things alone can cause post traumatic stress, but combine anyone of them with a marriage gone sour, problem with their children or just a pile of unpaid bills that grows and you have an officer in trouble.

Family problems of any kind can be stressful and if you combine these with a traumatic event the officer can face marriage problems. Law enforcement experiences the second highest divorce rate in America. A police officers family must come second to his job. He knows this, even though he won't openly admit the truth. They have to tell their wives that most holidays will be just another workday. Christmas for instance is generally celebrated when the shift is over and most times the officer is too tired to enjoy the joy. He knows his wife is not happy but he has his job and he has to pull his shift. The guilt he carries increases the stress. Some officers will turn to alcohol to counteract the guilt. The stress is temporarily relieved through alcohol. Enough alcohol he forgets his stress and is allowed to sleep.

Signs and symptoms vary in each individual officer. After a traumatic experience, officers may isolate themselves from other people including their families. Their emotions may become numb. After a while they become depressed, experience flashbacks of the incident. They

are unable to sleep and lose interest in sex. This will not only cause family problems, but will also cause problems for the department. These symptoms and disturbances over a period of (1) month will cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning. (American Psychiatric Association, 424)

The officer may come to work but their performance will suffer do to lack of sleep. The officer's relations to the public will become impaired due to the numbing of his emotions. They will resent being on the job having to sometimes fix a relationship when theirs is suffering. The drinking may extend into on duty time. Eventually officers may start finding excuses to not take calls or just start calling in sick. If departments are not able to recognize an officer in trouble, then the money and time put into their training will be wasted. Either by the officer missing work or by the department losing that officer.

The police officer has a difficult role. Police officers have little or no training for some roles that they are called on to perform. Police Departments fail to train police officers in skills of crisis counseling and human relations but they are expected to maintain peace and harmony, with no conflict. They work in an occupation that at any moment may bring a threat of death while spending greater periods of time that are routine and boring (Miller, 1993). Police organizations should attempt to acquire knowledge to recognize stress; the disorders caused by stress and train their officers and supervisors to recognize when stress occurs.

More than a quarter of police officers are alcoholic, compared to 10 percent of the general population. Drug abuse by cops is over 10 percent and may be higher as cops rarely admit to drug use because it jeopardizes their jobs and pensions (Kates, 1999). Police departments rarely fire officers for alcoholism but drug abuse is a firing offense.

Review of Literature

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is called a disorder because it disrupts the normal functioning of our lives. It disrupts sleep, relationships, work, and physical health. PTSD is called an anxiety disorder because some of its chief attributes are anxiety, fear and avoidance of anything, feelings, people and places, we feel may cause us pain. (Kates, 1999)

A police career is more than an occupation for an individual; it is a way of life for the officer and his or her family. Police marriages are susceptible to stresses inherent in the police profession. Changing work schedules, pressures on the job, long hours, and the threat of danger are but a few factors that can drive a wedge between a police officer and his or her spouse. (Miller, 1993)

Ask in officer what the first rule of police work is and you will hear, "Go home alive at the end of your shift." (Artwohl, 1997) This should be easy enough because police officers can handle anything. The "macho mentality" of law enforcement perpetuates the perception that police can handle everything, the super cop. (Garner, 86) Most police officers are fearful that if they admit to psychological or emotional problems, this would become a stigmatism that would haunt them throughout their careers and that would be a sign of weakness. Annually, America loses about 150 law enforcement officers in various line of duty deaths. In Stuart Gellman's book, *COPS, The Men and Women Behind the Badge*, (a study of a selected group of Tucson, Arizona officers), Gellman says for each officer killed in the line of duty, three others commit suicide, dozens develop heart disease and peptic ulcers, and three out of every four are divorced.

Only recently has "police stress" become a talked about issue in police departments. Police administrators began to realize that police work was a highly stressful job that exacted a high emotional toll on its officers (Bonifacio, 125). Studies show that police officers experience

the same type of symptoms that veterans of wars have displayed after their return (Williams, 1995). Police officers can be considered excellent candidates for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The essential features of the stressor capable of creating this syndrome is that such an event would produce significant symptoms in most people and that the event is one which is outside the common life experiences of most people. Such events as accidents, assaults, man-made and natural disasters, and shootings are events in which police officers more readily find themselves than the average citizen (Nielsen, 1986). Law enforcement agencies are beginning to design programs to deal with officer stress.

Researchers use suicide, divorce, and alcoholism rates as the three key indexes of stress in a group of people. Clearly, police work is stressful. Hans Selye, the foremost researcher in stress in the world, said that police work is “the most stressful occupation in America even surpassing the formidable stresses of air traffic control” The key indexes of stress are intertwined for police officers (Constant, 1991)

In 1972 Dr. M. Scott Peck chaired a committee of three psychiatrists appointed by the Army Surgeon General to study the MyLai incident and recommend research to understand its causes. Dr. Peck believes that chronic stress was an important factor leading two hundred Americans to commit this atrocity. Chronic stress affects people two ways. First, prolonged stress causes people to regress. Second, chronic stress numbs people’s sensitivity.

Stress is worry. Worry brought on by hearing you are about to be laid off, being unable to pay your bills, having a teenage child that is not living up to your expectations or just some event that changes the normal way things are done in your life. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD, according to the American Psychiatric Association starts with two key elements. To become a candidate for PTSD, first we must have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event

“that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury.” Secondly, we must respond with “intense fear, helplessness, or horror.”(Kates, 1999)

There are many parallels between the law enforcement officer and the military combat soldier environment. Both are taught to be ready to fight an unknown enemy. Both experience rigorous self-defense training to be ready for the hazardous duty they might have to experience. Both are given abridged lessons on how to handle conflicts and confrontations. They must be constantly on the alert for danger, looking for an enemy that is sometimes hard to identify. They both feel unappreciated by the people they serve or protect. Police officers and the military feel different from others in their home community. They feel alone with an “us against them” attitude.

During the Civil War, Dr. Decosta, a U.S. Army surgeon, reported high levels of tension, fast heart rate, inability to sleep, and fear of returning to combat. These symptoms were referred to as “soldiers heart” (Williams, 1995). During World War I the phenomena was called “shell shock”. Symptoms for this were, running amok, jumpiness, irritability, trouble sleeping, and physical tremors. World War II brought yet a new name, “battle fatigue” and with the Korean War we had “gross stress reaction”. Documentation of the medical cases of these wars led to the discovery and identification of post – trauma stress. The research of Vietnam War veterans gave psychologists the insight for establishing groundwork for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The research was responsible for “the recognition that shell shock is a psychological rather than a physiological disorder”...(Sonnenberg of g1985, 15).

In 1980 the American Psychiatric Association recognized posttraumatic stress disorder as a psychological disorder. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) says that post traumatic stress disorder features the development of characteristic symptoms

following direct exposure to death, threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate.

Three key indexes of stress are alcoholism, divorce, and suicide. Studies have shown that one most important factor to a police suicide was marital discord. Studies done in New York have indicated that most police officers were under the influence of alcohol at the time they committed suicide. These stress indexes are intertwined for police officers. Police stress is not unique or obvious and you can find any single stressor in another occupation. But, in law enforcement you find all the different stressor in one job (Contant, 1999).

Police officers are programmed with a macho mentality and as rookies they learn early not to let fellow officers see any weakness. Showing grief over a fellow officer being shot or not enjoying the fact that you shot someone is thought to be a flaw. An officer must be strong enough not to show their emotions and absolutely should never show they are scared or apprehensive. When an officer makes a decision to use deadly force in a situation, he will experience traumatic turmoil (Soloman 1988, 40). This causes a tremendous feeling of guilt.

When you put on a badge and uniform, you become all things to all people. You're a doctor, marriage counselor, a referee, a mechanic, a psychologist, and even a lawyer. You feel in control. You have been trained by the academy and you can now do miracles. You're in control. You are going to right every wrong, and put bad guys in jail. It does not take long for you to realize, this is not going to happen. No matter how hard you try the bad guys are going to win sometimes, and people are going to continue to suffer. You see the tragedy of hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, plane, and train accidents. You become an eyewitness to what human beings can do to other human beings. You see brother police officers fall and the reality sets in, you're not in control.

Methodology

Law enforcement is considered one of the most stressful of all occupations. The work that a law enforcement officer performs can lead to stress related mental illness or post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This can cause an over aggressive officer, lack of sleep, burnout, alcoholism, family or marital problems and suicide.

Should the Police departments learn to recognize the symptoms of stress and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder? Do these departments need to provide intervention? It is hypothesized that if the police department administration would begin to recognize symptoms of stress and assure the police officers confidentiality, the stressed officer would come forward to seek intervention.

Research for this paper spanned a wide range of resources. Information was obtained from books, law enforcement journals, psychological journals, and web sites on the Internet. A questionnaire was devised which documented age, sex, and years of service as a sworn police officer. It contained stress related symptoms and the respondents were asked to respond using a scale of, 1 = very little to 5 = great deal. Furthermore 10 questions were asked in relation to causes of stress and how the officers felt the department felt about stress. These were answered strongly agree, agree, neither disagree or agree, and disagree. Lastly, two questions were asked if the officer would recognize symptoms of stress and would you like your department to develop a stress management program. Both these were answered yes or no. Supervisors of that same department were given a different questionnaire also documenting age, sex, and years of service as a supervisor, and years of service as a police officer. Questions were asked pertaining to their knowledge of stress, some causes of stress and should their department have programs for stress intervention. They were to respond by checking, strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree,

and strongly agree. The officer questionnaire was distributed to 20 officers 18 were from Katy ISD Police Department and 2 were from a neighboring department. The 7 supervisors from Katy ISD Police Department were given the questionnaire for supervisors.

Findings

The results of the officer's questionnaire concluded that 70 percent of the officers exhibit some signs of stress, and 90 percent wanted a stress management program. When asked if they would be comfortable seeking counseling from their department 45 percent indicated they would not. When supervisors were asked questions about causes of stress and symptoms, 6 out of the seven answered neither agree or disagree. All the supervisors strongly agreed that training in stress reduction is needed. The supervisors were all in agreement that stress management programs would be beneficial to the department.

It was interesting to note that the officers that exhibited the most stress were the younger officers with less experience. The only two female officers given the questionnaire experienced high stress related symptoms.

The U.S. Department of Justice's National Institute of Justice conducted research involving one of the major law enforcement agencies in the United States. Through an anonymous survey of the officers in this agency, researchers discovered that, apparently, the law enforcement profession had not learned from the history of negative influences of job stress and what that stress does to officers exposed to it. The study, Project Shield, provided information about the negative effects of stress and broke these down into categories of psychological, physical, behavioral, and organizational public health.

During this research project, officers admitted anonymously to increased vulnerability to alcohol abuse and anxiety within the first 5 years of employment. Project Shield also found that

officers experienced increased risk of mortality and morbidity from cancer, heart disease, hypertension, acute migraine headaches, reproductive problems, chronic back problems, foot problems, and insomnia

Project Shield showed that profound emotional effects from stress occurred most often when officers attended a police funeral, were the subject of an internal affairs investigation, experienced a needle stick or exposure to body fluids, made a violent arrest, or personally knew victims. In addition, the study discovered that officers experienced organizational, or job-related, stress most often when making split-second decisions with serious consequences; hearing media reports of police wrongdoing biased against police; having administrators who did not support their officers; putting work ahead of anything, including family; and not having enough time for personal or family responsibilities.

In the psychological area, Project Shield revealed that officers lost energy or interest, including loss of sexual interest, along with experiencing pounding in their chest and feelings of impending doom. Most important, 1 percent of these officers considered ending their lives. Regarding behavioral problems due to negative job stress, officers reported smoking and drinking problems; more injuries; and physical abuse of spouses, children, and even their police partners. Based on the laws associated with police officers convicted of domestic violence having to give up their guns, the potential exists to lose officers to this problem if they are convicted of domestic violence or child abuse. Of course, physically abusing their police partners also can result in tragedy in the work place.

Project Shield demonstrated that whereas only a small percentage of officers in this agency reported these problems, they also were 30 percent more likely to report health problems that other officers in the agency, 3 times more likely to abuse their spouses, 5 times more likely

to report alcoholism, 5 times more likely to have somatization (multiple, recurrent, and long-term physical complaints apparently not due to any physical disorder), 6 times more likely to have anxiety, 10 times more likely to be depressed, and the least likely to seek help.(Harpold, 2002)

Stress results with change, unfulfilled demands, and failure to adapt to any given situation. Trauma is an emotional shock that creates substantial and lasting damage to the psychological development of an individual. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is called a disorder because it disrupts the normal functioning of our lives.

Negative job stress can produce behavioral problems including smoking, drinking, more injuries, and physical abuse of spouses and children. A department can lose an officer because he is convicted of domestic violence or child abuse. The negative media coverage of an officer's arrest and conviction can have long-term effects on a department.

Stress experienced by the law enforcement community and how it affects the health of the officer has gained some recognition. But most departments do not know what a stress disorder is and tend to not notice an officer in potential trouble. Most officers will keep problems to themselves and nobody is the wiser until it is too late to salvage a good officer and a career. A department that waits too late to recognize and correct a problem can possibly face lawsuits. These lawsuits can come from citizens or from the officer himself.

A police officer will experience a great amount of stress just in their everyday activities. Stressors among police officers are shootings, fatal accidents, death of fellow officers, child abuse, homicides, and natural disasters and now we can add terrorist attacks. Whether they actually involve themselves in a traumatic event or not, they have to be prepared to act when called upon. They are paid to handle everyone's problems major, and minor. Having to take

those problems as they come very traumatic to just a routine report call and you remember nothing is routine, even routine can turn sour. For 8 hours your emotions are up and down.

Police Departments throughout the nation have begun attempting to recognize Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Programs are being put into place that include, stress management, peer group counseling, stress debriefing, and critical incident classes. Departments are beginning to have officers see either in house psychologist or they are contracting with the private sector for help when the officer has been involved in shootings or some other traumatic event. Stress management programs have become popular throughout the nation. People have begun to understand that just like the machinery they use needs maintenance, so does their bodies and minds. Stress management programs are essential to having a healthy and productive department.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to encourage departments to begin recognizing the symptoms of stress and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The signs of stress as it relates to the law enforcement field. What causes stress in police officers and how departments can suffer because of stressed out officer.

Police departments should begin to set up programs to train officers and supervisors about stress. The supervisors should learn to look for symptoms of stress when officers begin less than average performance. The department should offer complete confidentiality for an officer reporting possible stress disorders. Police department will go to great expense to look into the personal background of an applicant. Some departments will not hire you because you have been divorced more than once yet they have officers and supervisors working for them currently that are guilty of this transgression. At the beginning they understand the importance of a person's personal life in police work. We must continue to recognize that an officer's personal

life is important and get him or her help in that area if we see it begin to affect their job performance.

A department spends a great deal of money preparing an officer to adequately perform his or her duties. Officers that exhibit high work standards should not be written off when those standards drop. Supervisors should recognize that this officer might be going through a period of stress caused by an event they experienced.

Joseph Wambaugh in his book, *The Onion Field*, told a horrific story about two Los Angeles police officers'. They were abducted while on duty one night in 1963. The criminals took them to an onion field one was murdered in front of the other officer. That officer was able to escape and survived. Then once back at his department other officers and supervisors began to second-guess what he did or didn't do.

The surviving officer became a victim for a second time at the hands of his friends and colleagues. Why was he able to escape? Why was he able to survive? There was not a critical incident stress management debriefing or employee assistance programs in 1963. This officer had no place or no one to turn too for help. Know one talked to his family and trained them to deal with the problems he was going to face. There were no clergy that could help him get through the abyss that he would have to travel. This officer was left, to walk this path by himself. That's what the police personality dictated. You have to be strong, macho, go have a beer and go on to the next traumatic experience. In the criminal justice system was another dark experience. For 9 years he had to relive the experience. Telling the horrible events over and over again during the hearings and the appeals.

This true story told by Joseph Wambaugh described an officer, now a Gardner and thief. It showed us symptoms of PTSD. Unfortunately this officer was not helped and eventually was

lost to PTSD. The law enforcement community lost another experienced officer but gained another thief, because this once proud officer became a shoplifter.

Gaining a knowledge of stress and post traumatic stress disorder will help a police department set up teams of people to limit the effects of stress related mental disorders. It will show the officers of that department that they are more than just numbers on a computer, that the department is concerned about them as human beings. This will help to create a healthier working environment and happier employees.

We can't stop the stress in police work, but we can recognize it and help officers in three areas. First, we must provide help to individual officers. Second, we must set up programs to help the family of our officers. Third, we must find ways to reduce the stress that is caused by the police organization.

Individual help can come through trained law enforcement psychologist and chaplains that understand the police officers life. The department can ensure that there is an insurance plan that has a good provision for out patient counseling with outside psychologist, psychiatrists, and therapist. An officer must be assured that strict confidentiality will be maintained and no one including the department will find out when an officer seeks counseling. Supervisors should be trained to recognize signs of stress and if necessary assist the officer in seeking help.

In acute instances such as a shooting, departments should have procedures set up to support and officer. The officer should not have to relive that moment over and over again. There should be one interview for the whole department. A critical incident support team should be set up to give the officer individual support. This should be comprised of officers who have been through a traumatic event and know what an officer feels at this point.

When these plans and procedures are in place an officer will see that the department does care. That officer will work better and healthier with the knowledge that he or she can receive help without the thought of getting fired. The officer will recognize that the department not only cares about the organization, but that the individual officer is a person with personal needs that must count.

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