

Law Enforcement Management Institute

A Review of the Literature of Police Burnout

A Learning Contract
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements For
Module I

By
Harold Roseberry

Greenville Police Department
Greenville, Texas
February 1990

182

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| 1. INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| Description of stress | |
| 2. STRESS AND RELATIONSHIP TO WORK | 2 |
| Misunderstandings of stress in relation to job performance | |
| Comfort Zone | |
| 3. WARNING SIGNALS | 3 |
| Workaholic | |
| 4. BURNOUT | 5 |
| 5. STRESS ON POLICE OFFICERS | 6 |
| Problems related to stress | |
| 6. TECHNIQUES TO STAY STRESSED | 9 |
| 7. CONCLUSIONS | 10 |

For one to do the best work possible in his or her job, a person must have total concentration on the task at hand. Even the least bit of worry or distraction can cause problems. Police officers must perform effectively under stress as do managers. Both must make split-second decisions, and in police work it could very well mean the difference between life and death. Poor judgment on the part of an intervening officer suffering from stress could have serious ramifications on the public. Stress can attack anyone, not just one type of person or one type of profession. Thomas R. Collingwood, Director of Continuing Education for the Institute for Aerobics Research, writes that in the past decade, there has been an increasing awareness concerning stress among police officers. The problems become apparent when law enforcement personnel are viewed strictly in terms of physical and emotional stresses which appear to be job related.¹ Only after we understand stress can we begin to combat it. In this writing we shall attempt to assess information obtained from literature concerning stress in relationship to law enforcement careers.

Stress has been described in many terms. In his book, From Panic to Power; The Positive Use of Stress, John J. Parrino implies that stress is a response to pressure, responsibilities, and real or imaginary threats from the environment.² Stress is what our bodies create in adjusting to all these demands, if we agree with Dr. Parrino. Dr. Hans Selye, a well-known biological scientist, states that, "Stress is the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon

it."³ Dr. Herbert Benson, noted authority in relaxation, says stress is the behavioral adjustment required by certain environmental conditions. He states that rapid cultural changes, urbanization and migration, socioeconomic mobility, or uncertainty in the immediate environment are examples of stressful circumstances.⁴ Stress is a common phenomenon of everyday life and the pressures we face in the course of day-to-day living. It seems, from the studies done, that stresses created by the demands of work are the most common. Feelings of insecurity and fear of failure push both workers and executives to their limits. We have all observed people who become so overloaded by stress that nothing they attempt gets finished. According to a national survey published by the Blue Cross, five out of six workers, at all levels of employment, indicated stress as a major factor in their occupations, resulting in "dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, angina, persistent coughs, neurotic behavior, and a host of other stress-related conditions." ⁵

There are many misunderstandings about stress and its relationship to work. One of the most widespread is that productivity and job performance are inevitably linked to stress. In the book, Healthy People in Unhealthy Places, K. Pelletier writes that it is now a certainty that improved job performance is linked to increasing stress up to a certain point; but that a point of diminishing returns exists where excess stress causes performance to deteriorate—whether the task is balancing a checkbook or determining a corporate fiscal

policy.⁶ A Time/Life video program series workbook, *Stress Management: A Positive Strategy*, brings out the idea that we all have a comfort zone. A comfort zone is where one works at his or her best and feels good about it. This program states that should you feel you are outside of your comfort zone, then consider whether you have too little or too much stress. The video suggests you take whatever action necessary to either increase or decrease the amount of stress you feel, so that you may return to your comfort zone and function the best you can. To reach this comfort zone a person must recognize and anticipate both internal and external sources of stress. One must develop an attitude toward commitment and acceptance of challenge so that one develops a sense that stress can be controlled. One must then engage in the practice of stress management that works best for that person. Every individual has a unique response to stress and must learn to control the response, but one cannot completely have freedom from stress. We must remember that stress is not only controllable, but it can also be positive. We have all heard the old saying that one works better under stress, but sometimes, however, we don't recognize the good stresses from the bad.

An article in the Texas Agricultural Progress states there are warning signals for complex problems of stress, which may signal the call for help. One example of these is undue, prolonged anxiety. For instance, a deep continuing anxiety with a state of persistent fear that latches itself first on one "cause" and then another is clearly a warning sign. Next,

depression grabs hold and usually is followed by withdrawal from friends, loved ones, jobs, and hobbies. These warning signs produce themselves through feelings of insecurity, lack of self-confidence, and feelings of helplessness. These are followed by abrupt changes in mood and behavior. Ironically, this can come after a job promotion. Some anxiety is normal when facing a new and demanding task—but the anxiety should diminish within a short period of time as one adjusts to the new situation. Another warning sign is trying to reach a level of perfectionism that is not attainable. Setting standards that are not merely high but are unreasonable causes great stress all around. The last of the great warnings is physical ailments. Tension-caused ailments can range from headaches to migraine, even nausea, with no apparent cause. When this occurs a physician needs to be consulted.⁷

One could become a workaholic quite simply by putting work in front of everything else. At this point a person may actually fear work and become afraid he or she will not perform as expected. Stress and emotion are both present in a workaholic. Workaholics usually enjoy their work and are not driven by a concern of control. They cannot disengage from their work to enjoy the many other aspects of life and relationships. Often the biggest problem is not the work itself, but the inability to do or enjoy anything else. Most of the time these people cannot take pleasure in their leisure and are not comfortable in social situations. They sometimes feel distressed and dissatisfied when they are not working,

which causes them to work harder and longer. A workaholic can be described as someone who takes work home, doesn't take vacations, attempts to do most of the work, has a cluttered desk and is a compulsive memo-writer. There are other signs, of course, but those previously listed seem fairly common of the workaholic. All of this develops into burnout, which evolves slowly over a period of long-term stress and spent energies. Burnout is an exhaustive state caused by excessive demands which one may bring on himself or is brought on by loved ones. Jobs, friends, and values in our changing society also produce burnout. All of these demands use up one's energy, making one unable to cope and will eventually affect motivation, attitude and behavior. Someone that is burnt out is not a very understanding person. He or she may be cranky, critical, angry, rigid, and resistant to suggestions or may be subject to negative behavior. Others most often turn away from these people. Burnout is not a condition that gets better by being ignored, and it is certainly not a thing to be ashamed of. It is something that comes from having good intentions, working hard, trying to improve oneself, demanding the best and doing more than one should. In their book, Stress and Anxiety, Charles D. Spielberger and Irwin G. Sarason agree that emotion serves the interest of concerns and action, and should be assumed under those as one of its inputs. They write, "Emotion should be considered an auxiliary process in the superordinated process of concerns and of actions dictated by those concerns." 8

We find that stress can come from other activities that invade our daily lives. The crying of a child, traffic snarls, ringing telephones, and demanding supervisors can all be stress factors, even though we may be unaware of them at that moment. Stress can build inside of us until we finally must release it. Usually, it is in the form of a sudden outburst of anger. This sudden outburst may be directed at our spouse, children, or bosses. It is this sudden outburst that the police officer under stress may project when he makes contact with a citizen. The citizen then projects the anger on the officer, thinking that the officer may be the cause. Unknown to the citizen, this anger may have been building up for some time and now has to be released. All managers, including police managers, have experienced a subordinate or citizen who has attacked them without cause. No one knows what a person has pent up inside them, ready to be released. This is why we see mass killings in public places, or whole families massacred by another family member.

The stress that one feels from strain and pressure is related to how much urgency or importance one puts on a given happening. A person on an assembly line may not have much stress built up due to their work, as long as the assembly line is running at a pace that he or she can comfortably accept and work with. That person knows day after day what is expected of them. However, a person that is charged with creating a new or easier way of operation does not have that security afforded to them. The same can be said for managers and police officers.

Constant change and not knowing what will occur next present no easy pattern to conform to and we leave our stress comfort zone. Air-traffic controllers feel a tremendous amount of stress due to the fact that so many lives hang on their performance and experience to operate in a manner that will ensure that safe arrival and departure of an aircraft.

This tremendous amount of stress is also on police officers. When reviewing stress and relating it to police officers we find that they are prime candidates. Police officers suffer disproportionately from serious health problems such as alcoholism, heart disease, gastrointestinal disorders, marital and family problems, and emotional disorders. Suicide—the ultimate symptom of distress—occurs in police officers at a rate far exceeding that of most other occupations. An article by Mary Cole, Hunt County, Texas, Extension Agent, states that of the five high-stress professions, the clergy is number one on the list for burnout. The other four are educators, social workers, medical professionals and police officers. The burnout rate is extremely high due to the service-oriented nature of the profession.⁹ The following are four types of stress that are frequently found in police work:

- (1) External stress related to negative public attitudes toward police or inability to stem crime;
- (2) Organizational stress such as low pay or arbitrary rules;

- (3) Performance-related stress including work schedules, boredom, or fear; and
- (4) Personal stress, such as marital problems or minority affiliation.

Alcoholism and divorce—two problems often related to job stress—are particularly frequent among police personnel. A number of officers learn to cope with occupational stresses by detachment—being emotionally uninvolved. As the length of service increases, this coping mechanism becomes part of the officer's personality.

Although police work is often dangerous, this affects police morale and health less than other factors. Police feel "hassled" by their own administrators, by judges who reprimand them, by attorneys who humiliate them, and by the public which is often openly hostile. Contrary to public opinion, people who become police officers are not erratic brutes, but healthy, normal human beings. But in as little as three months, a police officer's performance, health, and home life may reflect the effect of the negative community attitudes. The police officer may cope with the pressures by deadening all sensitivity and by avoiding involvement. 10

Clinical observations of some officers indicate that the most frequent common denominator of perceived stress is performance anxiety related to a fear of doing something wrong, of being criticized, or of being investigated, tried, suspended, or fired. Other sources of performance anxiety included concern about proving masculinity and civil suits filed against police

officers.¹¹ Environmental, interpersonal, and administrative factors also contribute to stress among police personnel. The conditions, circumstances, situations, and influences that act to the police officer to generate stress include those arising directly from work and personal experiences and those created by personal, public, and organizational expectations. A wrong word, a gesture, or improper action viewed by the public could cause a situation that could become an embarrassment to the officer or the department. Riots, shootings, and citizens' complaints are all created by the public perception of an officer or an officer's wrong doing. One mistake cannot be corrected by a hundred rights.

Experience and study have taught us the following sure-fire techniques to stay stressed:

- (1) Become a workaholic by putting work in front of everything else.
- (2) If you have the slightest doubt about your job performance, work harder, not smarter.
- (3) Be sure to take work home evenings and weekends.
- (4) Keep reminding yourself that vacations are for sissies.
- (5) Ensure no balance in your life between work and other activities.
- (6) You put more pressure on yourself if you do the little things first and worry about the big ones whenever you get a chance.

- (7) If you do projects in whatever order feels good and be constantly available to everyone, you will be assured to stay under pressure.
- (8) Also, avoid being the least bit assertive in getting your own time needs met.
- (9) Do not set your own personal or career goals and be sure to procrastinate. There's certainly no good adrenalin rush to be had from getting started on a project early. Anyway, when you were interviewed for the job, didn't you say you could work under stress?
- (10) Be sure to worry about things you can't control, and change things, everything you can, as often as you can. Stress thrives on change, so take advantage of it.
- (11) Keep things stirred up because it keeps life from getting boring. Also, it's an excellent way to take others down the path to burnout with you.
- (12) Last, be sure to keep working. No matter what your symptoms, no matter how stressed you're feeling, no matter how your performance is suffering, keep working. If you practice these skills diligently, you should have no trouble staying stressed out. 12

In all the literature reviewed, examples of how one can prevent stress is demonstrated. This information is logically of concern to the police officer. However, before one can

prevent stress and return to their comfort zone, the individual has to first admit and realize that he or she may be under stress. Without an overall look at oneself to discover the differences that may have occurred in his or her life, one may not address the fact that stress has become a part of his or her life. Burnout is not inevitable and can be prevented. The chances that an event will have a crisis impact on a police officer will lessen if several basic needs are met: specifically the feeling that one has control over the circumstances of his or her life, the understanding of why things happen, and the ability to predict one's future. In reviewing the literature in this area, it becomes clear that, despite gaps of knowledge or study, there are certain well-established phenomena that can relate to the career of the police officer.

END NOTES

1. Collingwood, Thomas R. "Police Stress and Physical Activity," The Police Chief, p. 25, 1980.
2. Parrino, John J. From Panic to Power: The Positive Use of Stress. New York: John Wiley and Sons, p. 24, 1979.
3. Selye, H. Stress Without Distress. New York: Lippincott, 1974.
4. Benson, H. The Relaxation Response. New York: William Morrow, 1975.
5. Blue Cross Report. 1978.
6. Pelletier, K. Healthy People in Unhealthy Places. New York: Delacorte Press, 1984.
7. Texas Agricultural Progress. Vol. 25, No. 4; pp. 23-24.
8. Spielberger, Charles D. & Sarason, Irwin G. Stress and Anxiety. New York: Hemisphere Publishing, p. 15, 1975.
9. Cole, Mary. "Good Ideas," Greenville Herald Banner, p. C-2, 5 November 1989.
10. Kopes, W.H. Psychological Stress in Police Work, p. 28, 1974.
11. Jacobi, J.H. "Reducing Police Stress: A Psychiatrist's Point of View." Kroes, W.H. and Hurrell, J.J., Jr., ed. Job Stress and the Police Officer: Identifying Stress Reduction Techniques; Proceedings of Symposia. Bethesda, Maryland: U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Occupational Safety and Health, Division on Biomedical and Behavioral Science, 1975.
12. Stewart, Douglas. How To Stay Stressed. Handout, Instructional Systems Association Seminar, pp. 66-67, January 1986.