

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

=====

**Stress Management: The Dangers Of and Solutions
For Work Related Stress Among Police Officers**

=====

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

=====

**By
Quentin Sammon**

**Humble Police Department
Humble, TX
October 2004**

ABSTRACT

Because of the high levels of violence encountered by police officers on the job, the level of work-related stress associated with a career in law enforcement is extremely high.

Researchers have found that police officers have unusually high amounts of work-related stress compared to other professions, and that a lack of proper stress management can lead to serious consequences for officers. Physically and psychologically, the intensely stressful situations that officers face while on duty can lead to severe damage to an officer's health. If left untreated, work-related stress can lead to such serious emotional consequences as depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, or even suicide. However, if officers are provided with the proper tools to efficiently manage this stress, not only will the health of police officers be dramatically improved, but many lives may be saved. Fortunately, many tools are available to help alleviate and manage work-related stress among police officers. Research suggests that physical fitness, religious affiliation, and counseling are all effective methods for properly managing work-related stress. If officers are equipped with the right information on how to combat the dangers of work-related stress, they can avoid the damaging physical and emotional consequences of this epidemic.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction.	1
Review of Literature	2
Methodology	6
Findings	7
Conclusions	9
References	11

INTRODUCTION

Upon beginning a career in the law enforcement community, a new officer must assume an enormous responsibility as a civil protector and peacekeeper and in performing these duties will inevitably be exposed to extreme levels of violence and work-related stress. Researchers have found (Band & Manuele, 1999) that the levels of stress associated with police work are among the highest of all professions, as this type of stress is uniquely violent compared to the types of stress encountered in most occupations. Though unavoidable, this high level of stress can, if not effectively contained, lead to devastating consequences. If work-related stress remains untreated, an officer's physical and emotional health is put at serious risk. Because the potential harm resulting from work-related stress can be severe, efficient stress management techniques are vital to the health of the officer. Research suggests (Quick, 1997) that various methods of stress management, such as physical fitness, faith and spirituality, and counseling, can help to alleviate the high levels of stress an officer faces on a daily basis in performing his or her job. By initiating this type of preventive stress management, the officer can be equipped with the necessary means to effectively manage work-related stress.

The purpose of this research is to identify the different types of work-related stress encountered by police officers, and to explore the various methods that officers can employ to cope with this stress, and, as a result, promote a healthier lifestyle. This research will help answer the question, "Is work-related stress a serious problem in today's law enforcement community, and what methods should be employed to effectively contain this stress?" Results from surveys of officers from several departments will be examined to provide insight into the types of work-related stress facing members of today's law enforcement community. These surveys and other research are

intended to expose the high levels of stress faced by these officers and shed light on possible solutions to help combat this dangerous situation.

Research will reveal many helpful methods that officers may utilize to combat the dangerous effects of work-related stress. Findings of this research can present valuable benefits to the law enforcement community by outlining many effective techniques for managing the extreme work-related stress encountered by police officers. By putting these methods to use, officers can commence a healthier lifestyle, both physically and emotionally, while helping to fight the negative effects of work-related stress.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Thorough analysis of current literature dealing with work-related stress in law enforcement reveals that various stressors encountered by police officers at the workplace take a severe physical and emotional toll on an officer's well being. According to Cartwright and Cooper (1997), the term "stress" is used to describe the way a person responds to internal and external pressures that can push the individual beyond his or her physical and psychological threshold. Researchers believe that stress and its consequences are not simply caused by outside stimuli, or a person's ability to cope with these environmental pressures. Rather, stress is caused by a complex combination of personal and environmental pressures.

Many researchers agree (Band & Manuele, 1999) that the levels of stress encountered by those in the law enforcement community are extraordinarily high in comparison to other fields of work. The many dangerous (and frequently life-threatening) duties of a police officer, along with the heavy burden of personal and societal expectations about job performance, make police work especially stressful. This level of traumatic stress can lead to dangerous and lasting repercussions.

As noted in a study by The Institute of HeartMath (IHM, 2004, p.1), “Constant exposure to society’s interpersonal violence, negative or confrontational interactions with individuals, a sense of personal endangerment, fear of revenge from criminals, and subservience to an ambivalent, watchful public produce negative emotional repercussions that can affect police officers on a chronic basis.” In the HeartMath study, conducted to measure the physiological and psychological stress levels of police officers, research revealed that various stressors contributed to the high levels of work-related stress found in the law enforcement community. Operational duties that inherently involve such high stress situations as shooting incidents, major disasters, and family violence can cause high levels of traumatic stress, while the aftereffects of these highly emotional events can cause long term stress for an officer. Because officers are constantly exposed to such traumatic events, the effects of this stress can negatively affect an officer indefinitely.

As noted in the HeartMath study, aside from stress encountered as a result of their daily duties, police officers must also deal with organizational stressors such as shift schedules, excessive paperwork, and poor interpersonal relationships. Studies suggest (Band & Manuele, 1999) that frustration with departmental stress and related work functions can lead to chronic stress. Police officers must also deal with a sense of isolation when the citizens they serve and protect “react to them with fear, suspicion, prejudice, and open hostility” (Band & Manuele, 1999, p.77). This sense of alienation is often fed by the burdensome, and often conflicting, expectations of self, community, and fellow officers.

Without proper stress management, these stressors can lead to severe and devastating physical and emotional damage. HeartMath’s (2004) study revealed that police officers have higher blood pressure and stress hormone levels than clerical workers, and are over twice as likely to develop cardiovascular disease. Another alarming statistic is the higher death rate of police officers

from cancer. On a psychological level, police work can lead to anxiety, depression, psychological burnout, or emotional exhaustion. Because of the high level of exposure to violence and major disaster, police officers may also develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. Most startlingly, the mortality rate from suicide is three times higher in police officers than in other municipal employees. The devastating physical and psychological consequences of work-related stress in law enforcement are alarming, and reveal the immediate need for effective stress management.

Because the high levels of stress found in today's law enforcement community can lead to such dangerous physical and emotional consequences for officers, it is imperative that proper steps are taken to effectively manage this stress. Research suggests that finding a healthy balance of work, home and recreational activities, along with using leisure time to relax effectively, helps an officer to manage stress correctly (Quick, 1997). Some documented methods of stress management that have been found to be effective include physical exercise, spirituality and faith, and counseling.

There are many obvious benefits of physical exercise, such as increased energy, strength and flexibility. Studies (Quick, 1997) reveal that exercise, as an added benefit, acts as a physical outlet for stress-induced energy, frustration, and aggression. Aerobic exercise contributes to cardiovascular health, while muscle strength training can lead to better work performance, as well as help to vent hostilities. Overall, physical fitness leads to many physical and emotional benefits, such as decreased muscle tension, increased mental energy, greater self-esteem and self-awareness. Another effective outlet for managing work-related stress is faith and spirituality. Over the past two decades, medical researchers have increasingly recognized spirituality and faith as a valid and powerful means of maintaining and restoring health. Several studies have been conducted that validate the healthful benefits of religion. Researchers (Quick, 1997) found that people who attend

church regularly have lower blood pressure, and less cardiovascular disease, emphysema, and cirrhosis of the liver. Interestingly, those with weak attendance were shown to have a mortality rate two to three times higher than regular attendees. Another study (Quick, 1997, p. 244) revealed that “among patients with cancer and heart disease, religious involvements were related to increased survival and quality of life and decreased anxiety, depression, anger, and substance abuse.” In a review of several studies, one researcher (Quick, 1997) concluded that a belief in God not only lowered mortality rates, but increased health and well being. Because religious involvement promotes a sense of community and fellowship, researchers believe that this sense of belonging helps to counteract the negative effects of stress.

Researchers (Quick, 1997) agree that one of the most dangerous characteristics prevalent among police officers is the tendency to keep work-related stress and feelings to themselves. Studies suggest that talking about stressful situations helps an officer to put the trauma at a more manageable level. Learning to express these feelings can greatly improve one’s health by reducing stress and strain on the restorative mechanisms of the body. Researchers (IHM, 2004, p.5) concur that communication is key, especially in the workplace, as “ineffective communication among coworkers...can lead to feelings of hostility, mistrust and separation between team members and has a negative impact on productivity and teamwork.” One striking similarity among the literature dealing with work-related stress in law enforcement is the universal call for immediate and effective stress management training for police officers. Because of the severe consequences of work-related stress among officers, the need for stress management is urgent. Pascual (2002) notes that police agencies must act to alleviate these consequences by training their officers in stress management. Nabors (2001) calls on police agencies to address the need for stress management instead of fostering the misconception that asking for help shows weakness. Because work-related stress

among the law enforcement community is so dangerous, police officers and police agencies must utilize the available tools to effectively manage this potentially devastating epidemic.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to determine whether work-related stress is a serious problem in today's law enforcement community, and to identify the methods by which this stress may be effectively contained. Research should prove the serious danger posed to police officers by work-related stress, and present some valuable tools to help them manage this stress. In addition to information provided by research of current literature, a departmental survey will be used to establish the need for effective stress management within the law enforcement community.

Twenty-seven officers from departments throughout the state of Texas were asked to complete a questionnaire about work-related stress among police officers. The officers were asked to answer questions about their own level of work-related stress, their feelings about whether this type of stress is a serious problem for the law enforcement community, and whether they felt that a departmental stress management program might be an effective way to deal with stress in a healthy manner. The officers were also asked whether they thought police officers dealt with stress differently than the general population, specifically, if they felt that officers tend to internalize stress. Officers were also asked whether they felt that work-related stress affected their physical and emotional health. Of the twenty-seven agencies that were asked to fill out the questionnaire, all twenty-seven responded. The information presented in these questionnaires will be analyzed according to the officers' personal feelings about work-related stress and how they view this stress in relation to the law enforcement community as a whole. The answers provided by these officers

will help to reveal the serious danger presented to police officers by work-related stress, and establish some possible helpful solutions.

FINDINGS

As research has revealed, the level of work-related stress encountered by police officers is uncommonly high and unique to their profession, due to the high level of danger these officers face on a daily basis. Various studies (IHM, 2004) reveal the serious, and potentially deadly, physical and emotional effects of this traumatic stress, including heart disease, depression, and even suicide. Studies suggest that there are many effective ways for officers to combat work-related stress. Physical fitness, spirituality and faith, and counseling have all been proven (Quick, 1997) as beneficial tools in stress management. Many researchers (Nabors, 2001) agree that because of the natural tendency of police officers to internalize this stress, outside assistance in dealing with pressures of the job is crucial. In order to help establish the need for this type of stress management, twenty-seven officers from agencies across the state of Texas were surveyed to provide insight into their personal feelings about work-related stress in law enforcement. Of the officers surveyed, nearly 75 percent agree that they encountered a high level of stress on a daily basis. Twenty-six of the twenty- seven officers surveyed say that they believe police officers have a tendency to internalize work-related stress, which research has shown to have a dramatic and dangerous effect on an officer's health and well-being. In fact, every officer surveyed agrees that they feel that high levels of work-related stress could affect their physical and emotional health. The danger presented by this high level of stress necessitates some type of stress management program for officers to turn to in order to deal with their stress. Twenty-five of the twenty-seven officers surveyed believe that having stress management techniques available to them would be

helpful in reducing the level of a police officer's work-related stress, and twenty-six of these twenty-seven officers agree that an officer's department should provide a stress management program to help him or her more effectively deal with the traumatic stress encountered on the job.

The results of the study suggest that most officers almost unanimously agree that the levels of stress encountered on the job are a serious problem that must be confronted. These answers reflect the need for a departmental program to help the officers find outlets for their stress. Without this assistance, officers may continue to internalize their stress, thereby causing severe damage to their physical and emotional health. The information provided by this survey reveals the serious threat posed by work-related stress within the law enforcement community. Because officers encounter this high level of stress every day, its effects are lingering and dangerous. With proper training, departments can provide the tools necessary for a police officer to withstand the stress of his or her job and potentially help save the lives of their officers.

The study conducted by the Institute of HeartMath (2004) suggests that the health of police officers is severely compromised by work-related stress. Physically and emotionally, the unusually high levels of stress associated with police work can be extremely damaging. Research (Quick, 1997) suggests that physical exercise provides an outlet for work-related frustration, while improving mental clarity and promoting a greater sense of well being. Spirituality and faith are also well-documented tools that an officer can use to help manage stress. In fact, religion has been suggested in various studies (Quick, 1997) to decrease mortality rates and increase quality of life. Being able to talk about work-related stress has been proven effective as a stress management tool, allowing an officer to put traumatic events in the past. This research suggests that though work-related stress is a serious and dangerous problem, there are many tools available to effectively deal with stress in a healthy manner.

CONCLUSIONS

Because the level of work-related stress associated with police work is one of the highest in all professions, the physical and psychological effects of this stress can be devastating, and even deadly. The purpose of this research is to identify the different stressors encountered by police officers, and to determine strategies to help combat work-related stress. Through various forms of research, this report will answer the question, Is work-related stress a serious problem in today's law enforcement community, and what methods should be employed to effectively contain this stress? Research is intended to prove that work-related stress poses a serious danger to police officers, as well as present some valuable tools to manage this stress.

Based on findings from this research, work-related stress is prevalent among the law enforcement community, and can lead to devastating (and sometimes fatal) consequences for police officers. Physical fitness, spirituality and faith, and counseling are some effective tools for managing work-related stress. Because research suggests that police officers have a greater tendency to internalize work-related stress rather than deal with it in a healthy manner, it is necessary for an officer's department to provide him or her with the necessary tools to combat the effects of this stress. Setting up a stress management program within a department can help officers find a healthy way to cope with the stress of their jobs, and will contribute to their physical and emotional health. Having such a program available within their department will help officers realize that they are not alone with their problems and will help fight against the feelings of alienation that are common among police officers.

The findings of this research did in fact support the hypothesis that work-related stress is a serious and life-threatening problem within the law enforcement community. The stress management tools presented in this research can help departments develop effective techniques for

managing work-related stress among officers. If departments will implement a program to help officers deal with this type of stress, then not only will the officers' job performance be much enhanced, but their physical and emotional health will be drastically improved.

REFERENCES

- Band, S.R. & Manuele, C.A. (1999) Stress and police officer performance: An examination of effective coping behavior. *Stress management in law enforcement* Durham: Carolina Academic Press.
- Cartwright, S. & Cooper, C.L. (1997). *Managing workplace stress*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Institute of HeartMath. (2004). Impact of the HeartMath self-management skills program on physiological and psychological stress in police officers. Retrieved April 12, 2004 from <http://www.heartmath.org/research/research-papers/police/police-2.html>
- Nabors, D.W. (2001). *Police stress: The need to establish guidelines for recognition and stress management training*. Rowlett, Texas, 2001.
- Pascual, R. (2002). *Stress management for the new supervisor*. Framers Branch, Texas,
- Quick, J.C. (1997). *Preventive stress management in organizations*. American Psychological Association: Washington D.C.,