

Performance Recovery and Optimization (PRO) Program

Voiceover

00:00

Welcome to *The Beat*—a podcast series from the COPS Office at the Department of Justice. Featuring interviews with experts from a varied field of disciplines, *The Beat* provides law enforcement with the latest developments and trending topics in community policing.

Jennifer Donelan

00:16

I'm your host, Jennifer Donelan, and today we will hear from Dr. Brandi Burque. She's a psychologist with the San Antonio Police Department. And today we're discussing the program there called Performance and Recovery Optimization or PRO. So, welcome to *The Beat*, Dr. Burque.

Dr. Brandi Burque

00:32

Thank you very much.

Donelan

00:33

Tell us, what is Performance and Recovery Optimization or PRO?

Burque

00:37

All right. So, it was a program that was started with our cadets in 2013. It was a program that was developed in conjunction with Air Force Security Forces. Dr. Deloria Wilson is the operational psychologist for Security Forces, and her and I have worked together for years. When we worked in the Army together, we found that there was a lot of new resiliency programs, new stress management programs that were pretty good but we wanted something that was targeted more to the culture of law enforcement. So, we drew upon military psychology, police psychology, and mainly a lot of sports psychology to develop this training program. It's a comprehensive—you could call it a wellness, you could call it resiliency—it's just an all-around stress management program for police officers and their families even.

And so, how it's been developed is we first started with cadets. We have an eight- to 10-hour block with our cadets that we teach skills such as what the optimal responses in terms of adrenaline and cortisol, and we talk about how to modulate it through controlled breathing, muscle control, performance self-talk, attention management, a recharging module to talk about sleep and nutrition, and mental practice as well, trying to imagine something. And a lot of this has had great influence in sports psychology, a lot of scientific evidence to support it, we can use it in police too. And then, I go out with them during driving and tactics to reinforce the skills. And then, we developed in a five-hour in-service block so that every single officer in the department has been trained in the basics of this resiliency program last year.

So every Tuesday of last year for our in-service we taught officers on this and now we're currently developing a three-day program that's more intensive that's taught by me and other officers that focus on short-term and long-term performance on the job and how to increase wellness in terms of cardiovascular disease health too.

Donelan

02:34

And today, discussing on *The Beat*, what do you hope that our listeners, officers from other places around the country, will gather from our discussion?

Burque

02:42

Whenever there's a health problem identified, whether that's cardiovascular disease, even mental health issue such as suicide, depression, substance abuse, or stress, anxiety, PTSD, whenever that's identified in the department, you kind of see kind of this one-shot approach to something. It was like, well, now we're going to educate everybody on the signs and symptoms of this particular problem and hopefully they know how to intervene if we just educate people. And it needs to go beyond that. So much of our stress management programs in law enforcement are just lecture. It's just death by PowerPoint and that's it. But it needs to be embedded throughout the entire department, all the way up from leadership buy-in, all the way through different innovative ways to do that.

And so, that's why I brought on board police officers to help me write the modules of the program because they're going to figure out ways to embed it in different aspects. So, we have a daily bulletin, for example, that goes out to every single officer every day that has a bunch of other stuff and we put in a PRO corner that highlights different mindset pieces from stoic philosophy or from sleep hygiene or anything like that to try to figure out ways to get this message across. And also for police departments, having a mental health provider is incredibly important but a mental health provider for police departments needs to be embedded in the police department. They need to go on ride-alongs. They need to be training at the academy. They need to be doing stuff to understand law enforcement and the culture to be able to provide effective services that can be used.

Donelan

04:11

Can you give us some examples from say a cadet perspective, a veteran officer or officer's family member, just why they would need or benefit from the PRO program.

Burque

04:24

One of my very first clients when I first started with the police department was a family and her husband had just recently died of a heart attack and it was absolutely devastating. They had a wonderful relationship, it was a wonderful family. She was on her own with three kids. And she always told me, she goes, "If he didn't have a heart attack, he'd still be working today. He loved his job. He loved his job." And the cardiovascular disease risk, which is the number one killer of police officers, was so important,

and if I could find a way to figure out how to incorporate education and training to hit not only mental health but also cardiovascular disease, that would be winning. And so, when we looked at stress, obviously adrenaline and cortisol impacts cardiovascular disease, also impacts mental health too. So, a program that incorporates all that is important. We've had officers come forward after in-service last year and I remember when one of our assistant chiefs had wanted us to do this for our in-service class. And in-service is the most difficult audience you could ever teach for, and I thought, "Oh, this is going to be horrible because no one's going to like it," or whatever. Consistently every week we had officers come up to us and write critiques saying that this is something that they needed to hear every year. And in particular, one officer told me in the first time in 22 years, he felt as though that someone understood and cared about officer health and wellness for the department. We've even had cadets say they want more of it during the academy training. And even so, even on callouts I've had former cadets who are now police officers come up to me and just want to talk about an incident and be like, "Yeah, I remember exactly what you said in the academy, that's exactly what happened, and I really appreciate the training."

Donelan

06:02

Let's talk about that again, because all of our listeners might not be familiar with some examples of the techniques that you teach officers to deal with high adrenaline, stressful situations and what they can do to bring that stress down in the moment and in the long term.

Burque

06:17

Okay. Are you ready for a lecture?

Donelan

06:18

I am ready.

Burque

06:20

We know that there are different effects of adrenaline and cortisol when it's surging through somebody's system. And adrenaline dilates the blood vessels and lung airways and it gets you motivated for action and that's really good, but if you have too much of it for too long, it makes you sick to your stomach, weak and shaky. And then you've got cortisol on the other hand which is released around the same time. And it's got great properties, it does what it needs to do, but if you have too much of it for too long, you're increased for cardiovascular disease, inflammation, high blood pressure, all of that. But also cortisol doesn't make you think very clearly. And when we look at heart rate, for example, when you reach a certain level of heart rate, your ability to think clearly really starts to go out the window. Your fine motor skills fall apart. All of that stuff.

There was even recently a fascinating study—this wasn't done in law enforcement, this was just done in general—that there's an area the brain that scans people's faces and determines whether someone's

being very supportive or being very critical. And when it says that this person's being very critical, it communicates with an area of the brain that's responsible for fine motor skills, and fine motor skills start to shake and fall off. But what's more interesting is it causes muscle tension in your forearms and in your biceps so that whatever you're holding onto you grip down harder. Well, that says a lot because when an officer arrives on scene, nobody's saying, "Hey, we're so glad that you're here." They're yelling and screaming and they're very critical especially in this day and age. So, what is that doing to an officer's performance? Well, we can figure out ways, that's why training is so important. When there was a push to make police academies more collegiate, well, I was like, no, because we now know this is what happens to the body when it's under that amount of stress so we need to be able to inoculate someone to that stress so that they can be able to control themselves better. And so, if we can regulate that heart rate down, people tend to perform better. So, we look at controlled breathing, deep breaths, because it activates the parasympathetic nervous system to decrease adrenaline and cortisol. So then someone thinks clearly, their fine motor skills are intact. That's great. But we also do things such as muscle control, tensing and relaxing muscles, which is done in sports psychology.

And then, the more advanced techniques are looking at things such as performance self-talk. So, how you talk about a situation in your own head can impact how you perform. We had one of our driving instructors indicate that when he was going through driving school, one of the courses he was having a really difficult time with and it wasn't until he talked himself through that course that he did better. One of the most powerful ones that I think that we've incorporated is from sports psychology is called mental practice, and it's imagining a task from the very beginning to the very end to successful completion but imagining it in all five senses. And one of my good partners at the University of Texas at San Antonio, their human performance labs, so sports psychologist, demonstrated ways that you can teach mental practice, so you can show mental practice. Because it activates the same muscles as if you were actually doing it. So, they looked at downhill skiers and when they go through a simulator, even though they're not actually skiing, the same muscles are being used. So, we tell cadets, "Hey. When you're learning to do a felony stop, mentally practice that at night." And I give them my own stupid example because I learned the obstacle course and I was terrible at the obstacle course but the more I mentally practiced it, the better I got.

Donelan

09:40

And mentally practicing it is like going through your head like you're on the obstacle course, like, "Oh my gosh, I'm coming up to where I crawl underneath the ropes."

Burque

09:47

Yes.

Donelan

09:48

So, you're just visualizing it through your head?

Burque

09:50

Everything. And it activates the same muscles as if you're actually doing it. So, you know, we do those things to help them perform better in the academy which then hopefully will help them perform better on the job, but this stuff can be used at home too. We tell them, "Hey, you don't respond the same way to somebody complaining about the neighbor's dog barking that you would to, say, a domestic violence situation. How is that any different than when you come home and your spouse is upset about the day or your toddler's having a tantrum? The same skills you use to perform well at work you can perform well at home too." So, it's hitting that family piece. And so, these skills are translatable. We even did a version of PRO for middle school girl scouts, we just changed up the terminology. It still works.

Donelan

10:35

OK, so, there's the aspect of the program for cadets when they're training, eight hours. Group sessions?

Burque

10:41

Yeah, it's in a classroom. And we do a couple of different exercises to kind of demonstrate. One of the big ones is what we call the zombie exercise, which is I have a—it's a shower curtain with zombie targets and shoot and no-shoot targets. They have five seconds to view what's in front of them and they have to write it down. And then we show them how their attention can be misdirected. And then, throughout the whole academy experience, the other instructors are enforcing these types of skills, and then when I'm out there during tactics or some of the driving stuff, I reinforce the skills during briefs and debriefs.

Donelan

11:14

And then, for current officers, you have the one-day in-service?

Burque

11:18

Yeah, we did that last year, that was five hours. And then now we're in the middle of developing a three-day continuing education program.

Donelan

11:25

And then also if there's an officer or his or her family feel like they need some help with these skills, they can schedule one-on-one time?

Burque

11:33

Oh, yeah, absolutely. So, what's great about our San Antonio PD is that we have three embedded psychologists. We see officers and their families, unlimited amount of sessions at no cost. So, it could be for marital counseling, I see kids even for a wide range of different things.

Donelan

11:50

Do you find your program's unique among police departments throughout the U.S.?

Burque

11:55

I think the information itself isn't necessarily unique. I think the delivery is unique. And just as an example that always stood out in my mind, after in-service I had an officer, his name is Officer Cliff Burns and he came up to me and he said, "You know, I really want to be a part of this. I really want to help develop it." I met with him a couple of times and he said, "I really want to bring kind of a stoic philosophy mindset." And he's like, "A lot of people don't know much about it or they have misconceptions about it but I think it would help." And I thought, "I don't know if he can—" and he accomplished it. He accomplished it so well. Our mindset module is phenomenal because of him. And he made such an impact when we presented it to our peer support team that we had officers quoting Marcus Aurelius on Facebook and Instagram. And so, I think it's the delivery that makes it different. The fact that we're embedded, the fact that it's officer driven, and that I'm out there helping whenever I can during live training.

Donelan

12:58

Well, fantastic. And with that, if any of our listeners want to find out more, where can they find you on the Internet?

Burque

13:04

Okay. So, we're developing a website but we have a Facebook page, it's called—if you just put in the Facebook search tool "Performance and Recovery Optimization," you'll find it, it's the only one there. You can also e-mail me at brandipro2016@gmail.com.

Donelan

13:24

And that's Brandi, B-R-A-N-D-I—PRO, P-R-O—2016—all one word, @gmail.com. Well, this has been truly fascinating to discuss what you all have been doing with this program, PRO, in San Antonio. I just really wanted to hear about the buy-in you have from it seems like from the chief right down to the actual cadets on the value of this. Any closing thoughts you would like to leave with the listeners of *The Beat*?

Burque

13:48

I just think having a passion for this was something that I just really love and you got to find people that have a passion for officer safety and wellness as well because that's what's going to make or break any type of program.

Donelan

14:00

Dr. Burque, I can't thank you enough for joining us today.

Voiceover: *The Beat* Exit

14:04

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Voiceover: Disclaimer

15:03

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