

STRESS IN POLICING: SYNDROMES AND STRATEGIES

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As a police supervisor, would you allow an officer to go on patrol with a deficiently maintained vehicle? Would you let him or her walk into a crime in progress with an unserviced duty weapon? How about a malfunctioning radio, or even an ill-fitting utility belt or uncomfortable pair of shoes? You know the answer. The tools of law enforcement get banged, bruised, and worn out, and they need to be periodically checked and fixed. Yet, ironically, far less attention is often paid to the care and maintenance of what is arguably every officer's most valuable resource: their brain.

Accordingly, in order to provide effective, science-based interventions for law enforcement stress syndromes, it is crucial that we understand the effects of different kinds of stressors, as well as the range of well-validated behavioral, administrative, and mental health strategies that can lessen their impact on the men and women in policing. I am honored to have the opportunity to begin this discussion here today.

Daily stresses involve the numerous interactions that police officers have with citizens in their patrol communities. Ninety percent of what an officer does every day involves dealing with people, ranging from casual conversations to dangerous confrontations. Training in behavioral self-control, communication skills, and verbal de-escalation strategies can help officers defuse many hostile scenarios that might otherwise erupt into a deadly force encounter. At the same time, such training gives the officer a sense of mastery in dealing with a wide variety of interpersonal scenarios, and this confidence in one's own skills and abilities is itself a powerful antidote to stress.

Chronic or **cumulative stress** builds up over time, and may include both work and personal issues. A supportive family system can buffer the impact of work stress, while satisfaction with one's career can offset the corrosive effects of a difficult home life. But when both systems start to fray, the individual's coping abilities are stretched to the limit. Police officers are notorious for bottling up feelings and they typically avoid seeking help, usually out of fear of appearing weak or incompetent.

Unfortunately, these suppressed emotions may eventually punch through the officer's defenses in the form of alcohol abuse, domestic violence, overly aggressive policing, deteriorating work quality, or officer suicide. Law enforcement leaders can create a subtle but powerful healing environment for their troops by destigmatizing, encouraging, and supporting access to mental health services for officers in distress; sometimes, by setting the example themselves.

Critical incident stress refers to acute life-and-death encounters, such as officer-involved shootings, in-custody deaths, injury or death of a fellow officer, or responses to particularly disturbing homicide, child abuse, or disaster scenarios. In such cases, aside from the standard internal investigation of such incidents, a separate and confidential referral should be made for a post-incident mental health check-up, and, if necessary, for follow-up services, such as critical incident stress debriefing or individual counseling.

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a specific clinical syndrome that occurs in response to a severe stressor or combination of stressors, and involves a characteristic set of symptoms including intrusive re-experiencing, numbing and avoidance, heightened arousal, and impairment in cognitive or emotional functioning. Fortunately, PTSD as a permanently disabling syndrome is actually uncommon and can

be made rarer still by appropriate early mental health intervention and peer support following a traumatic event.

However, if you ask most rank-and-file cops what their greatest source of stress is, they typically won't cite the gritty everyday hassles and dangers of law enforcement. These, they mostly accept as expected parts of their police role. What really bugs them are the **organizational stresses** that emanate from the top brass within their own law enforcement agencies, what they perceive as confusing or unsupportive messages from the very people they expect to be on their side. Thus, to encourage productive and ethical work performance from their troops, police leaders must learn and practice effective organizational management and communication skills. Constructive discipline is not inconsistent with respectful treatment of police personnel; in fact, it may depend on it. Setting the example for ethical and honorable behavior begins at the top.

In recognizing the potential benefits of mental health services for policing, it is also important not to oversell it and to respect its limitations. Not everyone needs counseling for every problem, and even the most comprehensive program of stress management won't eliminate police misconduct by immature, impulsive, or corruptible cops. But the vast majority of officers who feel they are treated fairly within their own agencies, whose efforts to seek help are encouraged and supported by their supervisors, and who view this support as an indicator of their agency's respect and concern for their welfare – these officers will usually reciprocate in their daily patrol efforts, will be less likely to express their frustrations on the street, will be more willing identify the miscreants who spoil it for everyone else, and will generally be motivated to uphold the **culture of honor** that most police agencies strive to maintain.

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