

“The Need for Continual Mandatory Stress Management
Training in Police Work”

Article

by

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Enforcing the laws of our modern society is an essential responsibility, filled with inherently stressful conditions. Law enforcement officers continually face the intrinsic danger of physical violence and the potential of sudden death while carrying out their mission.

Occasionally the results are alarming. For example, in April 2004, Officer Stephan Gray, a seven-year veteran of the Merced Police Department, paid the ultimate price while attempting a routine traffic stop. The suspect initially ran, then fired shots at Gray, striking him twice. Gray, 34 years old, would later die at Merced Community Hospital, leaving behind a wife and three young children.¹

One week prior to this incident, San Francisco Police Officer Isaac Espinoza, 29, was working undercover in one of the city's roughest neighborhoods when a gunman fatally shot him. It was the first killing of an on-duty officer in San Francisco in 10 years. Espinoza left behind a widow and three-year old daughter.²

Both of these well-publicized events have the potential to impact countless other officers. Police officers with effective coping skills will respond more realistically and appropriately. Those not so well equipped, will perceive the world as more unpredictable and dangerous. Such officers may demonstrate their negative view of society through future actions that are less fitting.

Officers frequently see the grizzly outcome of violent assaults, drive-by shootings, fatal traffic collisions and murders. In March 2004, Fresno experienced a shocking mass murder of nine people. Police Chief Jerry Dyer synopsised the impact through this statement to the media, "You're prepared for anything when you take a call,

but I don't know that anything can prepare you for this. A 30-year veteran came out of the house with a look of disbelief in his eyes."³

There are numerous symptoms particularly common in the law enforcement culture that can serve as indicators of stressful conditions that are not being addressed properly. Divorce, suicide, heart disease and many common ailments are just a few of them. The rank and file approach to deal with the pressures of the job was well intentioned. Co-workers frequently resorted to an ineffective and unhealthy “suck it up and drink it off” quick fix, commonly known as “choir practice.”

Although these stressors have been studied in the past, there has never been a mandated continual form of stress education. In the late 1960s, some positive changes began to occur. There was a move to help officers with problems that were deeply rooted and to assist them with internal healing. Some departments began to formalize their responses, usually by incorporating officer-initiated Alcoholics Anonymous groups made up exclusively of alcoholic officers.⁴

In the 1970s, the psychological field took a serious look at how stress was affecting police officers. Officers were questioned as to what bothered them most about their job and how they felt in the weeks following a stressful incident. Some agencies took psychologists on as consultants.⁵ Successful cops were also questioned about how they best dealt with the rigors of the job. Retired Fresno Police Sergeant, Bob Milla, remembers this trend. He warned, however, that this change was not necessarily about helping a cop get over a personal challenge. Milla vividly described a member of executive staff explaining the need for a psychologist so that “chinks in the armor” could be identified and removed. Milla clarified that “[it] certainly wasn’t to help officers.”⁶

It appears that there is still much room for improvement in the area of stress management in law enforcement.

Current Costs

Police Divorce

As recently as November 2001, Nicole Roberts and Robert W. Levenson (researchers from UC Berkeley) conducted extensive research of the impact that job stress had on police couples. They found job stress in police marriages was toxic for marital interaction and certainly contributed to the high divorce rate seen in police marriages.⁷

An interesting finding was that officers and their spouses showed increased cardiovascular levels and lower bodily movement on high-stress days. A pattern of high cardiovascular arousal, with low somatic levels, is similar to the kind of “freeze” response linked to states of intense fear. This pattern may be a psychological stance of vigilance and defensiveness, a state believed to help an officer survive in the field. Roberts and Levenson speculate that on highly stressful days, officers maintain this posture at home, when they interact with their loved ones. When wives sensed their spouses had a difficult day, they became defensive and vigilant. This occurred either due to anticipation of difficult marital challenges or in an effort to avoid increasing their husband’s tension level at home.⁸

Unfortunately, the results of their study predict an unhappy outcome for police families. Police marriages are at a heightened risk for a number of negative outcomes, such as separation or divorce.⁹

Police Suicide

In January, 2003, Tacoma Police Chief David Brame attended a voluntary training course on emotional survival training for law enforcement officers. He was so impressed with the content of the course that he arranged to have the instructor come to his agency so all department members could benefit from this same wisdom.

On April 25, 2003, Brame brutally shot his wife in front of his two children before killing himself with the same gun. Those who knew Chief Brame said he seemed fine in the days preceding the murder-suicide. City Manager Ray Corpuz said, "What made this situation particularly difficult to understand is that Chief Brame recognized and was concerned about how emotional stress can affect police officers."¹⁰

The example of David Brame is not an aberration. Statistically, police officers are more likely to die by suicide than most others in society. The nation's largest police organization, the Fraternal Order of Police, studied suicides among 33,800 of its 270,000 members in 1995. They found a suicide rate of 22 deaths per 100,000 officers. This was nearly twice as many as the national average of 12 per 100,000 people.¹¹ Police officers kill themselves at a rate 8.3 times greater than those who die at the hands of criminals.¹² It is evident that in spite of increased awareness occurring in the 1980s and 1990s there still remains a severe problem associated with police suicide. It was not until 1996 that a hallmark study on police suicide by John Violanti was published.¹³

Tactical decision-making

When a person is under stress, the mental capability of processing information is not as acute as when not under stress.¹⁴ This is a principal reason for training frequently

on high risk, low occurring situations such as shooting a firearm, using a taser or tactics related to SWAT operations.

When formulating a plan under stress, a person is more likely to come up with an irrational solution due to an inability to perceive new information.¹⁵ In fact, the greater the stress, the greater the likelihood the decision-maker will chose a risky alternative.¹⁶

The Yerkes-Dodson Law, or so-called "performance-anxiety curve," illustrates this principle. In 1908, Robert M. Yerkes and graduate student John D. Dodson noticed that a rat's ability to find food at the end of a maze was related to its stress level: underfed rats solved the maze more quickly. There was a point at which too much stress became a hindrance--where anxiety no longer helped speed the rats through the maze. Instead, they froze in fear, or made unwise, hurried decisions.¹⁷

The costs associated to civil liability are great when officers make ill-advised, hasty decisions associated with taking a person into custody or using deadly force. When an officer makes a bad decision, it lays the foundation to injure a department financially in a paid judgment or out-of-court settlement.

Other Costs

It is well documented that long-term stress can lead to heart disease, headaches, digestive disorders, high blood pressure and irritable bowel.¹⁸ With scientific advances, such as magnetic resonance imaging, or MRI, brain researchers can observe the physical results of stress in humans. Harmful hormones are secreted, essential cells die and pathways between brain regions essential to memory are broken. The consequences can range from abnormal eating to such long-term crippling disabilities as ulcers, colitis, anxiety, irrational fear and major depression.¹⁹

Needless to say, these disorders hurt organizations in quantifiable terms, e.g., increased absenteeism, decreased productivity, turnover, and early retirements. The impact to police organizations in the way of reduced effectiveness in decision-making is of even greater concern. This has a direct impact on complaints, lawsuits, and reduced trust from the community.

Fresno Police Department

The Fresno Police Department has recently created an Employee Intervention Program. The goal of this program is to place all employee support programs under one manager. In the past, all such programs were in different areas of the organization, making coordination difficult and disconnected. One of the major successes to come out of this effort is a peer-support group for police employees struggling with challenges related to anxiety and depression. This group has been in place for the past three years and has served over 30 department employees.

It would seem to the objective observer that these approaches are sufficient to combat job-related stress. Although current interventions offer arguably limited help, they do not thoroughly address the problem of job-related stress, suicidality, and other psychological disorders in a timely manner. These programs currently act as a bandage over an arterial wound. As helpful as they are, many officers do not find out about them before their symptoms have grown disproportionately to their acute or chronic stressor. More in-depth intervention is required to address the problem and make it more acceptable within the law enforcement community.

Currently, police officers must attend First Aid/CPR training every two years.²⁰ The rationale is that rendering aid to a citizen is a perishable skill that could save a life.

The same argument can be made for stress management training having the potential to save an officer's own life. Mandatory, continual stress management training is proposed to fill the void.

Mandatory, continual stress management training is defined as coursework that all department members are required to attend on a regular basis. There are similarities to mandatory range qualification courses or CPR training which police personnel are already familiar with. By mandating this type of instruction, and assigning financial resources to it, management demonstrates the perceived value in the content. This "buy in" at the top of an organization is part of the cultural shift that must occur for line personnel to view the material seriously.

The degree of repetition of this instruction is contingent on the amount of time dedicated to each segment. This could be approached in several ways. For example, a 2-day workshop scheduled once a year would have similar benefits to a revolving 30-minute briefing tape viewed on a monthly basis. The key is that the training be required and take place on a recurring basis throughout an officer's career.

The foundation for this education includes an overview of the fight or flight response, the conscious and subconscious mind, explanation of various stress disorders and depression, critical incident stress, and physical and emotional indicators of stress. Education on the benefits of relaxation techniques, support groups, self-talk control, affirmations and the identification and modification of unhealthy beliefs would also be included. It is critical that officers understand the benefits to incorporating changes into their lives based on this wisdom. Otherwise, the education is nothing more than information without personal transformation.

There are significant benefits to be obtained by a law enforcement agency implementing a mandatory, continual form of stress management. They include: reduction in: police suicide and depression, absenteeism, employee fatigue, heart disease and premature industrial retirements. A decrease in the occurrence of improper use of force and related lawsuits should also be seen.

As stated previously, this material must be perceived as important to the leadership of the organization. Exposure to this education must be mandatory and treated with the same seriousness as other required training. Failing to attend this training should be dealt with in the same manner that missed range appointments are.

The presentation of this data is just as critical as the information itself. As such, the teaching team should be a blend of instructors with recent police expertise and psychologists with a history in working with law enforcement. Officers, or those recently retired, would be the most likely candidates suited to deliver this information to an open-minded audience. Police psychologists would be more accepted by a police audience if they first take time to develop rapport with police personnel.

Conclusion

There are many prospective benefits to be achieved through the implementation of a continuous, mandatory form of stress education. Such instruction has the potential to inform law enforcement officers as to what external and internal stress is and how it can affect them. This must be done in easy to comprehend language describing what occurs physiologically when officers encounter the challenges of their jobs and personal lives. Police officers should be exposed to this information on a consistent basis throughout their career. A well-developed curriculum will provide an officer with fact-based

information derived from a scientific foundation. A training program that is scientifically significant will more than likely have officer buy-in, ensure its future success, and provide the emotional and psychological support that has been long overdue.

Properly delivered stress education will also provide information on what stress looks like when it is happening to officers or their co-workers. Officers will complete the education with a clearer understanding of the connection between stomach discomfort and unresolved resentment for their commander. Officers will recognize the nexus between recurrent headaches and unfair standards they have set for themselves or how a bout with insomnia is likely attributable to an officer-involved shooting.

A well organized stress education program will address the deep reaching implications that improperly managed stress can have on officers personally and the reverberations that impact their families. Lastly, but most importantly, a well organized stress education program should be solution-based: It should empower officers to change their state of discomfort. It is simply not enough for an officer to recognize that stress can ruin his or her life. Officers must be educated on how to end the negative repercussions of handling life challenges improperly. The same principals inherent in a strategic plan that can move an organization to transform can be used in getting a police employee to change to a more effective manner in dealing with work-related and personal stress.

As such, a well-created mandatory, continual stress management course will help employees to understand the benefits related to changing their thoughts and behaviors and how to accomplish this change. Providing continual, mandatory stress management

training to those entrusted to protect the community is the right thing to do for individual cops and the citizens they are sworn to safeguard.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁶ Retired Sergeant Robert Milla, Interviewed by Robert Nevarez, February 18, 2004
- ⁷ Nicole A. Roberts & Robert W. Levinson, "The Remains of the Workday: Impact of Job Stress and Exhaustion on Marital Interaction in Police Couples," November, 2001.
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