

Stress on police officers, the causes and impacts on their lives



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The law enforcement profession is one of the most challenging lines of work in the entire country and provides those who chose this profession with almost more stress than in any other profession. Stress within the law enforcement field stems from those officers working long hours due to shortages in manpower and their interactions with some of the worst people society has to offer on a daily basis. This stress that is intertwined in the law enforcement profession until recently has been seen as just a part of the job that every officer must deal with without due regard to the mental and physical health problems being exposed to daily stressful situations. Police supervisors and agencies have implemented internal and external stress management programs into their organizations to help those officers cope and deal with the stresses involved in their profession (Gathmann, et al., 2014). These stress management programs are in place to train officers in the proper ways to deal with the stressors in their job profession and provide counseling options to help officers through difficult tragic events they are involved in. Studies have shown that officers not properly dealing with their stressful jobs can lead to problems not only on the job, but also in their family and home lives.

Within the police profession it can become overwhelming to each officer over a period of time and also on a daily basis. Police officers deal with stressful situations almost daily placing themselves in harm's way that can take a toll on the mental health of the officers simply by having to be correct all the time. Officers pride themselves of having to be right 100 percent of the time, when in reality each officer is just a human being making the possibility of being right 100 percent impossible. Even with the best training in the world

people will still make mistakes and in law enforcement these mistakes have a higher chance of being detrimental to another person's life or their own. Constantly being in the lime light of a technological driven society where mistakes made, whether, large or small become instant news is always in the back of the mind of an officer on duty. These mistakes can have much more of an effect on the officer themselves and bring discredit to that officer, but also the agency he or she works for or more importantly law enforcement as a whole in the eye of society. The law enforcement profession in itself is a very stressful with having to deal with minor traffic infractions in one instance and then having the possibility of having to make a deadly force decision in the next. Adrenaline effects and decision making stressors placed on any person can create a self and public stress unlike most other civilian professions in this country because a simple mistake can cost an officer their life or the life of another individual. Officer are constantly effecting the financial stability, freedom of movement, or even the life a person several times on a daily basis can greatly effect the officer's mental health (Garbarino & Magnavita, 2015). these decision making stressors placed on officers is just the beginning of their stress on the surface, even more deeply is the work schedules that places fatigue to hinder their decision making ability. Most law enforcement departments struggle to maintain a constant flow of recruits to keep manpower at a level that can keep up with the demands of the public safety aspects in their jurisdictions.

As mentioned law enforcement officers usually do not interact with humanity at their best that can lead them on a daily basis to have a strain on their perception of human beings. Police officers the first line of defense in

everything from car accidents to murders on a daily basis, making death and severe injuries a normal occurrence and placing them in stressful environments that can have great effects on their mental health. Most difficulty in the profession comes from simply responding to a traumatic incident that involves the loss of someone's life and trying not to take the stress or mental image with them home to their family without. While law enforcement officers respond to traumatic or death related calls they also are tasked with simple jobs like traffic citations, which make switching their mental status from one call to the next very stressful on their mental state (Kaiseler, Passos, Queiros, & Sousa, 2014). In the past law enforcement supervisors held to the culture that these stresses were just normal to the profession and it was an accepted side effect to the job.

The symptoms of stress that apply to police officers have great effects on their mental and physical health, but more importantly their job performance or public trust. Prior to the 1970's the perception within the law enforcement profession was to have those struggling with the overwhelming stress was to place more hours on them to help adjust or make it a normal part of their life (Gathmann, et al., 2014). Over working causes fatigue that has been shown to impair an officer's judgment the same way that an illegal substance like alcohol reducing the effectiveness of their decision making ability which can place the officer and others in danger. Fatigue has also been proven to impair an officer's ability to discern from using the proper levels of force by reducing their patience when dealing with violators of the law or basically leading to the use of deadly force when the situation does not meet the criteria of that level of force. Studies into the work schedules of law

enforcement show that due to high fatigue reported within the law enforcement profession contributes to the rate of thoughts of suicide are almost 15 times higher than that of the normal population in the country (Maran, Varetto, Zedda, & Ieraci, 2015).

More prevalent detail into stress due to fatigue causing stress and health issues within the profession it is imperative that law enforcement professionals implement ways to reduce these symptoms more effectively. Police officers working 10 to 12 hour shifts, especially overnight shifts normally when the person's body is programmed to be sleeping combines stress and fatigue lowering decision making capability exposing the officer and those they interact with to possible undue risk (Maran, Varetto, Zedda, & Ieraci, 2015). Awareness of job schedules, fatigue, and health effects on police officers is something that must be viewed and trained within the ranks. Overall, the stress placed on law enforcement professionals in their day to day lives has a significant impact on and off duty, this is something that the professionals must help teach officers how to operate in these environments.

Several effective theories to helping police officers deal with the coping with stressors within the job exist, but the problem is getting the officers to use them on a regular basis remains the issue with law enforcement management. With each individual officer is having their own morals and stress management mechanisms to handling the stress involved with the law enforcement profession, each situation of a stressor is handled using an active coping technique or a personal coping mechanism. Although there are stress management techniques involved with the agency, each individual

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officer may use certain parts of the implemented training or chose their own path with dealing with stress. Some of the more active coping mechanisms used in law enforcement stress management deals with direct physiological counseling, cognitive group sessions, or Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM). Active coping mechanisms is a direct interaction that the majority of law enforcement officers use when dealing with a traumatic incident because of the nature of the incident and the personalities of the officers (Kaiseler, Passos, Queiros, & Sousa, 2014). While personal stress management mechanisms deals focuses on the officers preference in religion or family guided support to maintain a healthy balance of work stress not being intertwined into the home life. Stress management tools within law enforcement that are mentioned above are considered a health mechanism to handle stress, but in the same sense there are several ways that officers handle stressors and some of them can be destructive to their health (Kaiseler, Passos, Queiros, & Sousa, 2014). One of the biggest problems surrounding officers asking for help is the possible effects they feel it could have on their careers, by being seen as weak or possible reprisal from the supervisors. Officers will tend to hold the pain within themselves or bury it deep down making them carry the burden. This leads to future health problems mentally or physically and it creates a distance or anger towards the very law enforcement agency in which they operate. The scariest problem that this buried anger or stress creates is a high substance abuse problem while off duty for law enforcement officers trying to cope with the day to day stressors of the profession.

The problem is that many times the officer's involved in a traumatic incident are left to deal on their own without ever asking for assistance from a stress management program option. This is mainly due to the fact that many agencies fail to train or inform their members of these internal or external stress management options and they just tend to continue to work through their issues. In many cases they fail to know or underutilize the resources available in order to remove any doubt to their ability to maintain the officer's credibility to handle the stressful profession. The fear of being reprimanded or seen as not strong enough by other officers within their department can make officers effected by these traumatic incidents feel helpless in their job and can greatly reduce their family life (Garbarino & Magnavita, 2015). Although there are now so many support groups internally or externally the plain fact of officers using them is still not where they need to be and it shows with the overworked and stressed police officers on patrol.

Other stress management programs like Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) and peer oriented support groups are designed to intervene early after an incident using an internal mechanism made up of other law enforcement professionals that have a better understanding of what the situation each officer is placed in. This type of thinking was designed in the military services to help reduce the possibility of the development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) for those who were in combat areas and has now become a vital part of the law enforcement community because of the similarities involved in both professions (Kaiseler, Passos, Queiros, & Sousa, 2014). By intervening early after a traumatic incident law enforcement professionals that are trained in CISM or peer help programs

are brought in to use cognitive intervention in a group setting to help officers talk out their issues within their peer group. Studies show that officers feel more comfortable speaking to those within their own peer group than seeking outside help from other professionals that they feel really do not understand their true stressors in these situations. While these peer oriented stress management programs are very beneficial to the law enforcement officers themselves, there are also many support groups in place to assist their families.

Much of the focus on law enforcement officers and the stresses that are involved in the profession, but little is spoken of when it comes to their immediate family having to be involved in their stressors. Being the spouse or child that is in a law enforcement family can be very stressful when not knowing if their family member is safe when seeing incidents on the news. In many cases law enforcement officers have a difficult time talking to their spouses about their jobs and the stress involved, there have been several programs that support spouses and children in an attempt to bridge the large gap of understanding for better communication with officers and their family members. This is in many cases the only source of normalcy within society that an officer will use to help cope with the harsh reality of dealing with humanities worse individuals and considered by many the escape for the law enforcement officer is the best stress management tool (Maran, Varetto, Zedda, & Ieraci, 2015).

The role of police officers and the impacts of stress that this high demanding job has on their mental and physical health comes at a tremendous cost without proper care can lead to lasting effects. Law enforcement
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professionals must do a better job of utilizing the programs in place to focus these stressful impacts on their officers and their families to not only reduce the medical costs on their agencies, but also to prolong the health of their employees. Recruitment must also become a priority to allow vacation and leave to all law enforcement officers to help remove themselves for extended periods from the stressors involved in the profession for stress management. Impacts of not doing so will continue to make people think twice before entering the law enforcement profession that can be one of the most rewarding jobs in this country.

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