

Identifying law enforcement stress reactions early article review

[Health & Medicine](#), [Stress](#)



Law enforcement is an inherently stressful profession. A law enforcement officer's duty is to enforce the law, and to enforce it, the officer must face potentially harmful situations; where the officer is exposed to a number of foreseeable and unforeseeable situations, that the officer may or not be able to control. Potentially harmful situations are stressful on their own, but when the harm becomes real, the level of stress increases; and the officer witnesses, and sometimes experiences—and may be forced to cause—a great deal of harm.

In time, chronic stress may lead to serious physical and psychological consequences; thus, it is critical for an officer, and all involved in the officer's wellbeing, to recognize signs that have been associated with stress and move on to address them.

Causes of Stress

In addition to obvious external causes of stress faced in the line of duty, like witnessing your partner getting shot, or watching a child being hurt, there are other work-related factors that may cause stress. Work-related factors that have been associated with increased risk of stress include organizational factors like inadequate training, poor relationships with higher command, and lack of appreciation. Stress factors connected to the job itself may include long and unpredictable hours, poor communication in and out of the field, incompatible personalities, the public's negative perception of the profession, and specialized duties that come with their own internalized factors of stress—like undercover cases, hostage negotiations, and crisis management.

There are also personal stress factors to consider, including physical, emotional, and psychological factors. A law enforcement officer faces many of the same age-related issues of an athlete, for the successful performance of an officer's duties has strong physical, emotional, and psychological demands. It can be quite traumatic for an officer when a weakness in their armor is first discovered for it announces the beginning of the end of their days in the field.

Cumulative Stress

It is difficult to isolate a single stress factor than leads to pathological levels of stress, because not all people react to stress the same way. Clinical stress rises out of a confluence of factors, and may lead to a number of stress-associated pathologies, including gastrointestinal or cardiovascular disease, and alcohol or drug dependency. In severe cases, an officer may develop acute stress disorder (ASD), or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Whereas no one can predict whether and when an officer suffering from stress will develop ASD or PTSD, a number of core symptoms experienced during extreme trauma have been identified: re-living or blocking the trauma, suppression of feelings, sleep disorders, and hyper-vigilance.

Understanding the significance of these symptoms may help an officer seek help earlier. There is a strong connection between the frequency, duration, and intensity of the stress, and the development of ASD or PTSD; therefore, early intervention is of critical importance in the prevention, intervention, and management of these diseases.

However, the most important step that law enforcement organizations can

do to combat the problem is to establish a stress management program to help law enforcement officers understand that stress is a normal physiological reaction that can lead to abnormal pathophysiological consequences. Law enforcement officers must then learn to identify factors that may lead to clinical stress, and seek help to avoid the negative impact that stress can have on their personal and professional lives.