

Causes of stress and their impacts



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Stress has many different causes as well as negative impacts that are associated with it. The effects that stress has on police officers are numerous. When thinking about the word “ Stress” and all of the many different definitions that people apply it to, it becomes clear that it is difficult to measure due to the lack of consensus on what the true definition of the word should be (American Institute of Stress, 2017). Stress is by no means permanent, and it can be managed or reduced through a number of effective methods (Hansen, n. d.). When considering stress, most people associate it with bad feelings and negative outcomes of situations. It is important to note that not all stress is necessarily bad. Stress is caused by a reaction to an encountered situation that often poses risk. This situation is comprised external and internal elements and the interaction of the two. Distress is the stress encountered in daily life that has negative connotations such as a break up, punishment, getting hurt or injured, bad feelings, financial issues, and problems at work (American Institute of Stress, 2017). These reactions can create an assortment of different effects; both mentally and physically. Experiencing stress can affect your mood, create feelings of anxiety, make one restless, create a lack of motivation/focus, feeling overwhelmed, irritability/anger, and or sadness/depression (Mayo Clinic, 2016).

When examining the many major causes of stress for law enforcement officers; try to keep in mind that stress has many different effects on people.

What can cause one-person distress may not be a source of stress for the

next person. It is a well-known fact that individuals who work in law enforcement or any other emergency service experience a variety of stress intense situations and are required to perform immediate actions in order to gain control of the situation and sometimes force individuals to endure traumatic events that are unique to their job (Regehr, LeBlanc, Barath, Balch, & Birze, 2013). Police officers generally have to work long hours that constantly change, and when combined with the officer's having to work in ever-changing environments, it is no wonder that law enforcement personnel are under a large amount of mental and physical stress (National Institute of Justice, 2012). The stressors can be intensified by both personal and professional situations that can be carried into one another. Stress from police work can be caused by several things. Officers must endure shift changes, conflicts on the job such as choosing how to enforce the law, the constant threat on their lives, and a long list of other things. A police officer must be able to control their emotions even when provoked and are constantly being exposed to gruesome situations (University of Minnesota, n. d.). Any one of these pressures alone is enough to overly stress a common person, but an officer must endure all of them and still function at the highest level.

The stress that stems from police work can cause some serious health problems if not dealt with in a healthy way. Chronic stress will lead to high blood pressure as well as heart issues, insomnia, and other sleeping preventatives. Stress can also lead to mental illness such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and lead to suicide due to the increase of destructive stress hormones. University at Buffalo researchers have studied the effects

of stress on police officers for a decade and have found these results (Baker, 2008). When an individual holds on to stress rather than deal with it in a healthy way, the stress can cause the person to experience anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (National Institute of Justice, 2012). A majority of the stress stems from a constant change in sleep schedule and shift schedule. This combination of stress and change of schedule can lead to being exhausted and fatigued. Being tired can be detrimental to the health of law enforcement both mentally and physically. Exhaustion has many side effects on law enforcement, most of which are mental, and include frequent mood swings, impaired judgment, a decrease in adaptability, and heightening the sense that a threat is imminent. Fatigue can also increase anxiety and depression as well as increase the chance that an officer develops mental illnesses such as PTSD or bipolar disorders (National Institute of Justice, 2012). Being exhausted can bring just as much harm to the law enforcement officer's physical health by leading to high blood pressure, heart disease, and eventually heart failure if left untreated. Sleep disorders have become common in police officers due to their frequently changing schedules, both work and sleep, due to overtime and overnight shifts (National Institute of Justice, 2012).

Sleep disorders generally are a sign of a person being unhealthy and can cause an officer to lower their performance capabilities which in turn make unsafe outcomes more likely to occur. Law enforcement officers are twice as likely to have a sleep disorder and a study shows that many of these officers remain undiagnosed and untreated (National Institute of Justice, 2012). The sleep disorder that is most prevalent amongst law enforcement officers is

sleep apnea quickly followed by insomnia. If insomnia is left untreated it could create even more health issues ahead of time.

When law enforcement personnel become critically stressed due to all the present stressors, both personal and professional, it could play a large role in their performance in the field and put many lives at risk. Those serving their community in a branch of law enforcement are likely to have the mindset that accepts over exhaustion and stress as part of the job. With this state of mind, the signs and symptoms of both stress and being overly tired are ignored until a dangerous and serious incident brings it to light. A study on police officer exhaustion showed the following terrifying facts about law enforcement personnel being stressed and tired. Fatigued officers use more of their sick days and have trouble managing healthy relationships with other. Officers will have time management issues and will tend to show up to work late more frequently. Exhausted officers are more likely to make mistakes and errors on paperwork and will receive higher rates of complaints from citizens for careless acts and acts of misconduct. Due to the frequent rotation of shifts, officers are more likely to fall asleep while on duty and have issues testifying in court regardless of how prepared they are. Police officers will have issues communicating with their supervisors and will have stressed relationships with leadership. Worst of all, officers who are fatigued have a higher chance of hurting themselves or others due to lack of focus and missing danger signs. Officers are also more likely to retire earlier due to burnout. (Bond, 2014).

Individuals serving in the policing community, will seldom talk about these sources of stress due to fear of appearing weak and potentially creating

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more issues along the way. Police officers are committing suicide and suffering with their stress and traumas alone and in silence because of a fear based on a stigma against showing weakness and what their department may do (Olson & Wasilewski, 2016). Law enforcement personnel face stress on their own due to the stigma that they may receive for appearing weak due to severe and chronic stress. Law enforcement personnel may fear that their career or promotion could be in jeopardy if they decide to receive help for stress related problems. That is where the cycle continues to keep officers constantly stressed. Good leadership is important to any organization and is critical to combat this stigma and end the cycle of chronic stress.

There are preventable stressors that law enforcement personnel have to endure such as scarce amounts of training, excessive amounts of paperwork, and the absence of constant rewards for great job performance (University of Minnesota, n. d.). It is critical for the leadership of the department to acknowledge and manage their law enforcement personnel correctly by creating a work to rest ratio that does not risk the overall welfare of the agency or its officers. Surrounding the department with exceptional people will create a work environment that inspires officers to be motivated and dedicated to the goals of the department.

Police officers also receive stressors from the internal organization of law enforcement. Confusion of roles, conflict with roles given and who completes which role, lacking support from supervisors, few opportunities for promotion, as well as a lack of unity with coworkers all cause stress for officers (Hassell, Archbold, & Stichman, 2011). Departments that have bad

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leadership traits and strict rules and policies could also add to the stress that law enforcement personnel face due to the constant feeling of being under a microscope. One of the most common agency stressors can be leadership and how department leaders run the agency altogether. By taking an already stress intense job and adding any unnecessary stress along with what is already associated will bring down the morale and raise the anxiety level higher than what is appropriate. With so many expectations for perfection with so few rewards and opportunities, police officers often feel as if they have less rights than the suspects that they apprehend (University of Minnesota, n. d.). The addition of stress from work may cause police officers to have problems in their personal lives as well. These problems include a range of things including family, financial, or even health issues. When left alone and not dealt with in a healthy way, stress only creates more stress. By increasing the amount of money going to more impoverished sectors the workload will shrink thus creating a more enjoyable place to work and in turn lowering stress level in police officers (Hansen, n. d.).

When a stressful situation arises, individuals will find that their body and mind become flooded with chemicals that begin the fight or flight response. The fight or flight response is a natural response meant to help individuals to survive. However, this response at times can become unhealthy. Any activities that an individual can partake in that will help distract them from their unhealthy thinking habits and gives them a source of joy is a great stress relieving technique. The fight or flight response is usually where problems come into play. Law enforcement personnel are not always properly trained or educated on how to deal with and combat large amounts

of stress. Due to their lack of training, many are unaware of how to deal with these stressful events in a healthy way which can create more problems in their work and personal lives. By receiving proper training and being educated on how to recognize the damaging effects of stress, a police officer can adapt and overcome stress by turning distress into eustress. Law enforcement personnel and leadership can use this information as tool to motivate other each other with. All in all, sources of stress in life are all about one's perception of the stress and how their body and mind interpret it.

People often will rely on alcohol or some other substance to help them deal with all the stress affecting them. Making a habit of this dangerous behavior will only create more destructive problems in the long run. Abusing alcohol or other substances to manage stress is a very dangerous and unhealthy way to deal with encountered stressors. Along with substance abuse, other dangerous coping mechanisms include smoking, gambling or just doing nothing to deal with the stress. Using these mechanisms can possibly create more problems in both work and personal areas in life. Processing stress in an unhealthy way and ignoring it rather than dealing with it appropriately will only cause more issues down the road which only makes the detrimental behavior worse thus creating a destructive cycle. At times, people will only be able to see the bad in life and lose sight of the good. This dangerous mindset will only create a more destructive process if an officer is not properly trained or educated on ways to deal with the stress in a healthy way. There are no definite answers to determine what outcome stress could play on law enforcement officers. However, the fact of the matter is that

every officer is different from the other and every officer will handle the stress put on them differently. Research has proven that suicide rates in law enforcement are higher than most other professions along with the divorce rate for police officers (University of Minnesota, n. d).

Life is full of stress and there is no avoiding it no matter if its eustress or distress. When it comes down to it, what really matters is how one is able to perceive the stress, so they can deal with it appropriately. The way we perceive things will ultimately determine how well we work under stressful situations. Law enforcement personnel will always undergo more stress than the typical citizen. However, with proper training and education, officers can and will be prepared for these situations and will be able to find healthy ways to cope and manage their stress. It is important to not lose sight of the good when it starts to feel like there is nothing but bad things happening.

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