

# news

## Coping with police work's stress

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Police officers often face dangerous and nerve-racking situations which can adversely affect the officer negatively on-the-job and at home. The job of an officer is described as "hours of boredom interrupted by moments of terror," said Hummelstown Borough Chief of Police Charles Dowell.

Police work can be perilous and stressful. Officers deal with



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The Fraternal Order of Police offers officers classes and trainings on how to deal with job stress.

confrontations with criminals and have to be alert and prepared to deal with any threatening situation, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

According to Dowell, in traffic stops, the officer doesn't know who is in the car. It could be a fugitive or a grandmother. Police officers deal with short term stressors to responses. The officer responding to a call has to speed past other motorists and pedestrians to get to the location; the time it takes to get to the location is 30 seconds of stress.

For an officer, little stressors often build up. "The day-to-day dealings with the worst of society, constantly hearing and seeing the bad things that happen to victims, combined with working long hours, shift work, overtime, administrative / political issues within the department, etc. makes for a very stressful work environment. It is often hard to 'turn off' at the end of the shift," said Sgt. Todd Umstead from Supervisor of Public Affairs from the Lancaster City Police.

"In policing it has to do with low levels of stress over long periods of time rather than one traumatic

event," said Associate Professor of Criminal Justice Dr. James Ruiz of Penn State Harrisburg.

The work environment can be another stressor for a police officer. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, uniformed officers, detectives, agents and inspectors are usually scheduled to work 40-hour weeks, but paid overtime is common. Shift work is necessary because protection must be provided around the clock. Junior officers frequently work weekends, holidays, and nights. Police officers and detectives are required to work whenever they are needed and may work long hours during investigations. Officers in most jurisdictions, whether on or off duty, are expected to be armed and to exercise their authority when necessary.

Another stressor is complaints made by citizens. Sometimes citizens do not like the way a police officer acts and files a complaint against the officer. The officer is then investigated and that equals stress, said Dowell.

Police officers sometimes witness death and suffering resulting from accidents and criminal behavior according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. "I was a state trooper for 23 years and you see all kinds of different things. I was a detective most of the time and my expertise was in fire investigations. So you'd see stuff like families who've lost everything," said Sheriff of Dauphin County Jack Lotwick.

According to Dowell, the signs of a stressed out officer are clear. Work production goes down, quality and quantity goes down. The stressed out officer may receive an unusual amount of complaints about his or her demeanor or courteousness. The officer is irritable to coworkers and towards constructive criticism.

Lotwick, said an officer who is stressed while on the job might delay going to a call or try to push investigations on other officers. The stressed officer might try to put his work on others. Other signs of a stressed out officer are, "lack of participation, over aggressiveness, they lash out more, irritability, chronic complaints from officer, watching what others do," said Lotwick.

According to Rich Malwitz, Fraternal Order of Police Pennsylvania State Lodge State Deputy Coordinator/Critical Incident Management Program, police officers have high rates of alcoholism. Alcoholics' Anonymous groups have been created within police departments to help officers.

Suicide is another issue among officers. Malwitz said, nationwide as of Dec. 18, 2008 there were 430 police suicides. "We have a high suicide rate. A lot of symptoms of distress come out and basically creates dysfunction of people in law enforcement simply because of what those experiences and what that stress does to their body," said Malwitz.

Stressful situations in an officer's work environment often result in inappropriate behavior. When a person has been under attack, bullied, or stressed, something happens. Manifestations of the stress can include use excessive force and self medication, said Dr. Ruiz.

According to Dr. Ruiz, an officer who is over stressed may take the burden home which can make the officer very destructive. They rarely talk to their spouses and become disconnected. The stress taken home can cause marital discord. Dr. Ruiz previously worked for the New Orleans police department for 18 years as a patrol officer and platoon supervisor.

"Dealing with stressful situations affects your entire life. Just the way you react to it. We have a divorce rate of nearly 65 percent for first marriages. For second marriages it's 85 percent. We've got cops that have been married five times," said Malwitz.

Management of stress has not always been a popular method of coping for police officers. The problem is the police subculture said Dr. Ruiz. The police subculture is "of comradery, of loyalty, one officer backs up another, one officer lies for the other, the blue law of silence," said Dr. Ruiz.

When an officer seeks assistance outside his or her cohort, the officer is seen as weak, or not being able to handle his or her job. The police subculture is very much a part of policing. The unwarranted concern is that this individual cannot be trusted.

That if something happens on the street they're going to "fold up." An officer does not want to be labeled as that, said Dr. Ruiz.

"As supervisors, we can actually require employees to attend counseling if we believe there is an immediate need or that an employee is facing issues that could result in a dangerous situation," said Umstead.

According to Dowell, over the last few years there has been a push for programs and training police officers and cohorts in sitting down with police officers and talk with them. Not counsel them, but to evaluate where they are at. Prior to the push for programs, police officers were afraid to be seen as weak by their fellow officers. "A police officer is the person who everyone leans on and is the last person who wants to ask for help," said Dowell.

On top of the low levels of stress daily, police officer sometimes find themselves responding to critical incidents. A critical incident can be different for everyone and is an event that is out of the ordinary and sometimes very extreme. These events have the potential to cause distress to the police officer and also can overwhelm the normal coping skills that human beings have, said Malwitz.

Examples of critical incidents include, "officer involved shootings, any incident that involves children, SIDS death sometimes, car accidents involving children especially, any car accident that is fatal, sometimes domestic violence cases that are beyond the norm," said Mark Gaspich, Criminal Warrants Admin of the Dauphin County Sheriff's Department.

According to the Fraternal Order of Police State Lodge, the Critical Incident Stress Management services include: pre-crisis preparation and training, on-scene support, demobilization, defusing, debriefing, individual crisis intervention, pastoral crisis intervention, family support, and follow-ups/referrals. The pre-crisis preparation and training service is educational, informational and an in-service program for law enforcement personnel. On scene support allows for the team to observe, watch for acute reactions, give support, encouragement, and



Photo by <http://dauphin.mygopsite.com>  
Sheriff of Dauphin County Jack Lotwick has dealt with death and tragedy though out his career.

able to deal with stress reactions.

The demobilization service is a short, informational, session with personnel as they are ready to leave the scene of a long duration critical incident. Defusing is where the officer is debriefed within a few hours after a critical incident. Debriefing is confidential and non-evaluative. The officer discusses thoughts and feelings resulting from a critical incident. Individual crisis intervention is a peer to peer intervention which is used to alleviate the symptoms of critical incidents. Pastoral crisis intervention gives spiritual, faith-based support for individuals and groups. The family support service is for the police officer's family members and significant others. The follow-up/referral service is to for following up with a contact from the team and/or a referral to mental health professionals if needed.

The International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, indicated CISM, is an extensive, integrative, multi-component crisis intervention system. Critical Incident Stress Management is considered comprehensive because it consists of various crisis intervention components.

According to the Fraternal Order of Police State Lodge provides CISM training. Individual crisis intervention and peer support, group crisis intervention and Law enforcement perspectives for CISM enhancement.

At the time of the critical incident the stress experienced is post traumatic stress. Post traumatic stress is stress after a traumatic event. That is what the Critical

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