

Police Stress

Police officers experience frequent and ongoing stressors in their work. These stressors range from cumulative stress (constant risk on the job, the need for adherence to often restricting and conflicting regulations, public perceptions that may be inaccurate) to critical incidents such as violent crimes, shootings and mass disasters. While these stressors are inherent and accepted by officers, they need not necessarily lead to burnout or other psychological problems including substance abuse, marital problems, anxiety, depression or post traumatic stress disorder.

It is critical for officers and supervisors to understand the causes and effects of stress on the job and to allow for open acknowledgement and discussion of the subject. Below is some basic information about the sources and effects of stress as well as some suggestions on how to cope with the effects of stress. For further information you may contact any of the organizations listed in this brochure.

Possible Sources of Psychological Stress

- **Within the organization characteristics:** lack of supervision, lack of positive reward, restrictive policies, excessive paperwork, poor equipment.
- **Criminal Justice practices:** unfavorable court decisions, recidivism, court delays and continuances, adversarial nature of the justice system.
- **Public practices:** distorted press accounts of police work, allegations of brutality and racism, adverse local government decisions such as funding.
- **Police work itself:** role conflict (e.g. apprehension of criminals while needing to maintain their rights), irregular work schedule, danger inherent in the profession, inability to resolve and close many problems in the community, witnessing human suffering, seriousness of the consequences of one's actions, critical incidents such as shootings or mass disasters, cumulative nature of stress.

Normal Reactions to a Critical Incident

- No one who responds to a critical event is untouched by it
- Profound sadness, grief, and anger are normal reactions to an abnormal event
- You may not want to leave the scene until the work is finished
- You will likely try to override stress and fatigue with dedication and commitment
- You may deny the need for rest and recovery time
- You may find it difficult to stop thinking about the event
- You may have nightmares about it or difficulty sleeping
- You may want to be alone or only with others involved in the event
- Physical complaints are very common; the body keeps the score

Signs That You May Need Stress Management Assistance

- Difficulty communicating thoughts
- Difficulty remembering instructions
- Difficulty maintaining balance
- Uncharacteristically argumentative or angry
- Difficulty making decisions
- Limited attention span
- Unnecessary risk-taking
- Tremors/headaches/nausea
- Tunnel vision/muffled hearing
- Colds or flu-like symptoms.
- Disorientation or confusion
- Difficulty concentrating
- Loss of objectivity
- Easily frustrated
- Unable to engage in problem-solving
- Unable to let down when off duty
- Refusal to follow orders
- Refusal to leave the scene
- Increased use of drugs/alcohol
- Unusual clumsiness

Ways to Help Manage Your Stress

- Limit on-duty work hours to no more than 12 hours per day
- Make work rotations from high stress to lower stress functions
- Make work rotations from the scene to routine assignments, as practicable
- Use counseling assistance programs available through your agency
- Drink plenty of water and eat healthy snacks like fresh fruit and whole grain breads and other energy foods at the scene and after the event
- Take frequent, brief breaks from the scene as practicable.
- Talk about your emotions to process what you have seen and done
- Stay in touch with your family and friends
- Participate in memorials, rituals, and use of symbols as a way to express feelings
- Use physical exercise to help work through the stress
- Take care of your body through rest, relaxation, massage etc.
- Pair up with a responder so that you may monitor one another's stress