

Stress

Stress has a considerable impact on officers and work in law enforcement is widely regarded as highly stressful. Police officers are often faced with stressful situations during a routine tour of duty. Their bodies' response to these stressful situations is good since it prepares them for an emergency but the stress response takes its toll on the officers' physical and mental states.

What is stress?

Stress is the body's reaction to stressors that upset the body's normal state. Stressors can be physical, mental, or emotional. Some experts say that stress alone probably does not cause illness, but it contributes to circumstances in which diseases may develop. Stress weakens and disturbs the body's defense mechanisms.

Factors Causing Stress in Policing

Although most people have stress in their careers or lives, studies have found evidence of particularly high rates of stress in certain professions. Some have called policing the most stressful of all professions.

According to researchers, factors leading to stress in police work include

- Inadequate training
- Poor pay, equipment and working conditions
- Frequent exposure to brutality
- Fear about job competence and safety
- Lack of job satisfaction
- Public's lack of support
- Negative or distorted media coverage
- Work overload

This list covers both external and internal stressors, stressors in law enforcement work itself, and stressors confronting the individual officer.

Effects of Stress on Police Officers

Too much stress affects health and may eventually lead to such serious health problems as hypertension or a heart attack. Studies also indicate that police have higher rates of divorce, suicide, and other manifestations of stress than other professions. One study of 2,300 police officers in the US revealed that:

- 37 percent had serious marital problems;
- 36 percent had health problems;
- 23 percent had problems with alcohol;
- 20 percent had problems with their children, and
- 10 percent had drug problems.

Other researchers estimate that between 20 and 30 percent of all police officers have an alcohol problem. The typical drinker is single, over 40 years of age, with fifteen to twenty years of police experience. Studies indicate that after killing someone in the line of duty police officers suffer post-shooting trauma that may lead to severe problems, including the ruin of their careers. 70 percent of these officers leave the police force within seven years after the shooting incident. There is a growing trend of officers committing suicide. Statistics tell us that twice as many officers die in New York "by their own hand" as those that are killed in the line of duty.

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Teacher's Notes

! The topic is not supplemented with student's worksheet.

1. Ask Ss the questions:

- Describe the most successful situation at work.
- What was the most difficult situation in your police career?
- What made it hard to handle?
- How did you manage?
- What did you feel then?
- Which events do you usually remember better, the good ones or the bad ones?
- Why?
- Are you more of an optimist or a pessimist?
- Which people are more likely to suffer stress, optimists or pessimists / extraverts or introverts?

2. Tell Ss the joke:

*If you wake up and you do not feel stressed,
You are probably dead.*

Help students to conclude that stress is part and parcel of our daily life.

3. Ss read the text.

4. Ask Ss if they agree with the list of stressors given in the text.

Point out that the research was carried out in America.

Ask if they share the problems in their own work environment.

Encourage students to discuss the issue.

5. Say that we cannot avoid stress. Still, we can develop ways to manage it.

Divide Ss into two teams. Team A works on ways of managing stress by individuals, team B works on solution on police authorities' level.

6. Teams report findings; followed by discussion

7. Ss put down their ideas on a poster. Stick the poster to the wall/board.

Encourage Ss to complete it with new ideas whenever they feel like it.

8. After 2 weeks you may ask Ss to write a concluding memo/leaflet on ways of managing stress.

! (This is a good awareness-building exercise that may help students cope with stress-related problems.)