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Stress, Distress and Adaptation in Police Work

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Prior to the 1930's, the field of stress research was virtually non-existent until Hans Selye began his life's work which stimulated him and others to examine and to elucidate human reactions to stress. Selye discovered that the non-specific effects of stressors are the same. The organism reacts to stress with what he call the General Adaptation Syndrome, which consists of three stages: The stage of alarm, the stage of resistance, and the stage of exhaustion. He pointed out that no living organism can exist in a continuous state of alarm and that the development of disease is actually a fight to maintain the body homeostasis.

Serious derangements in the secretion of adaptive hormones in the resistance stage lead to what he calls diseases of adaptation. The body's faulty adaptive reactions to stress appears to encourage various maladies, including emotional disturbances, headaches, insomnia, sinus attacks, high blood pressure, gastric and duodenal ulcers, rheumatic or allergic reactions, and cardio-vascular and kidney diseases (38).

Every stimulus produces non-specific stress in addition to the specific characteristics. The non-specific effects of stressors result in adrenal-cortex enlargement, shrinking of the thymus, and deep-bleeding ulcers. Selye advises that we choose carefully between what he calls syntactic, or healthy, and catataxic or unhealthy behaviors since each of these affects particular hormone mechanisms (39).

George B. Whatmore outlines a physio-pathologic state that he calls "dysponesis" meaning "faulty effort" in which errors in distribution of energy in the nervous system occur. "By affecting nervous system function, it can alter the regulation of almost any bodily system. Among the numerous clinical manifestations are fatigue, insomnia, headache, backache, hypertension, anxiety, depression, indigestion, impotence, frigidity, and spastic colon". Like Cannon (6), he points out that covert arousal for fight or flight is often inappropriate and leads to increased heart rate, elevation of blood pressure, secretion of adrenalin and other hormones, mobilization of glucose and fatty acids and numerous other responses as to prepare the organism for violent muscular excitation. However, when no such activity is called for, both the arousal and the autonomic responses interfere with normal organ function. If frequent and prolonged, they may lead to tissue damage (3).

It is not the nature of the stress itself that is important but the person's preception of the event and his emotional responses to it. The body gives us clues to indicate when it is tense: gritted teeth, tense forehead and neck muscles, eye strain, fluttering eyelids, irregular shallow breathing, cold hands, curled toes or fingers, butterflies in the solar plexus (10).

Stressors may be pleasant or painful but the common denominator to most occupational stress is change. All change involves some kind of loss which affects dependency needs and induces anxiety in dealing with the unknown. A few

of the psychological stressors involve threats to the individual such as losing control of oneself, a threat to one's conscience or the threat of actual physical harm (27). The fear of loss of control is often a consequence of perceived stress. Personal internal control seems to reduce stress and lead to better decisions in taking a more active role in seeking out more information about the threatening situation. Although cognitive control may initially induce stress through a state of vigilance, the work of rehearsal and worry involved prepares for confronting a difficult or challenging situation and yields greater objective control for achieving goals (1).

It has been pointed out that police work is a high stress occupation, (17, 31) making officers a definite population risk for diseases of adaptation. Although police recruits are above average in intelligence, in emotional ability, and in their desire to serve the community (34), each individual in this group has his own stress tolerance level, which when unbalanced, either by a stress overload or underload, will lead to symptoms of distress. Optimal stress seems to be important rather than no stress since humans have a stimulus hunger and an innate need for sensory and environmental inputs. Experiments in sensory deprivation have shown that symptoms of distress will also develop rapidly in the complete absence of stress which then results in an underload.

Recently the Connecticut Supreme Court upheld a law allowing monetary rewards to the families of policemen who die from heart attacks whether at home or on the job. The court noted an unusually high rate of heart disease and hypertension and therefore felt that the officers deserved the benefits (8).

There are a variety of factors that influence physiological and psychological stress reactions in persons in the police profession. Man's functioning is affected by biological rhythms related to night and day, and his emotional responses may also fluctuate with his adrenal rhythm. This suggests the possibility that maximum vulnerability to fear may occur between the hours of 4 and 8 a.m. when the human adrenal hormones reach their peak. There is also evidence that the body is capable of remembering a time of fear and continuing to anticipate and react at that same biologic time in the future even though the provoking stressor has been removed (4).

Personality factors are also important in determining an individual's stress tolerance level. It appears that the anxiety-prone or conscientious and responsible individual is more susceptible to stress and that, paradoxically, anger reactions may help insulate against a stress overload (39). Heavy responsibility, fear of failure, and being responsible for other people's welfare seem to incur an excess risk which may be related to coronary disease. Diabetes, hypertension, myocardial infarction and ulcers are more common among people subjected to close personal responsibility for the lives of other people (7). This seems especially pertinent to police personnel. In one study, introverts reacted more negatively to severe conflict than extroverts, and interestingly enough, flexible people experienced more conflict than rigid ones. In this connection, positions involving creative problem-solving, in contrast to routine supervision and management positions, were also more conflict-ridden (14).

Many sources of stress in police work are role-related. The officer is an authority symbol in the community and therefore automatically the target of large amounts of anger and resentment. He often works in a dangerous and

threatening environment where injury or death are real possibilities. In addition, he is the omnipresent mental health agent who is called upon to handle traumatic emergencies and crises of all types (33). In the course of his adaptation to a very demanding and stressful role, the officer's perceptions and attitudes will be shaped in directions which help defend him against a stress overload. Kirkham (16) gives an excellent description of the attitudinal and value system changes that occurred in him when he switched from the role of mental health professional to police professional. It is a common reaction for persons riding in a police car for the first time to experience heightened awareness of the stresses focused on the police role (30).

Certain predictable events occur to many young officers as they attempt to adapt and to cope with the multitude of stressors impinging on them. The development of the "John Wayne" syndrome and its attendant conflicts has been delineated as the "middle age syndrome" with its concomitant problems (32). The increase in divorce hazard for young officers with one to three years on the job and for those with ten to fifteen years of experience are likely related to these developmental events (28).

Reiser (31) has previously outlined some of the organizational stresses on officers. One researcher feels that the greatest pressure on a worker comes from his superiors in his own department who are dependent on his performance. Though they care about the worker's adequacy, they are not so dependent on him that they inhibit their demands. The least pressure comes from the worker's peers and from role senders outside his department (15).

Considerable stress derives from the officer's peer group and the pressure to conform and adopt their attitudes and value systems, particularly early in his career. Supports given by the peer group help reduce outside stresses and provide reassurance and security (31).

West (41) points out several other important factors. Although often overlooked in predicting success, it is helpful to ask the individual what kind of work he likes and then help him to adapt successfully. Individuals have different maturation rates on the job which affect their stress tolerance levels. This suggests that initial selection cannot completely address itself to the issues of learning over time to adapt to the job adequately. Another way of coping with non-specific stress is to seek out danger and confront it directly in order to stay in control. This may be related to the leading cause of death in policemen which is auto accidents on and off duty.

Though stress exists at all levels in the organization, it tends to affect the middle management executive in a somewhat greater degree since the man-in-the-middle is on the receiving end of pressure from both above and below (18,22). Feelings of helplessness results from such factors as work ambiguity, work overload, and difficulty in dealing with community relations functions. Conflicts over the promotional system, lack of opportunity for direct participation and decision-making, and inter-personal conflicts experienced by minority group members are additional sources of stress in many police organizations.

A study on a sample of male officers in Cincinnati found that there were three major sources of stress which produced a threat to the individual's sense of professionalism. These were the courts, community relations, and equipment. It was also found that work tended to affect the officer's home life, particularly shift work, which had considerable bearing on the types and quality of

friendships developed (17). In this connection, relatively little administrative attention has been paid in police organizations to the effects of marital and family stress on the officer's functioning.

Miller suggests that it is possible for learning to influence the amount and duration of the fear elicited in a given danger situation. He says that observations of combat indicate that fear in situations of intermittent danger can be reduced by learning exactly what to expect and what to do (26).

The best response to uncertain threat is the contingency response which is possible when one has a knowledge of the danger agents and their effects so that proper steps can be taken when alerting occurs.(12) Bourne points out that when attention is paid to providing the support that enhances the adaptive capacity of the soldier, he is able to make a highly successful adaptation to combat at both a psychological and physiological level.(5)

A variety of traditional and innovative programs have been developed for use in police organizations to reduce stress using cognitive and behavioral approaches. Traditional training programs emphasize the development of technical skills which can support the individual and be a center of focus in critical incident situations. For this reason, tactical and how-to approaches have been most common in police training. More recently, the usual lecture approach has been supplemented by self-paced multi-media instructional programming techniques. However, adequate evaluative comparisons of the two approaches still remain to be done.

Human Relations Training programs and experiments with encounter and sensitivity training groups have gained some vogue in police circles in recent years. However, current research indicates that the typical human relations training program may result in more negative attitudes than before (33). For this and other reasons, variants of sensitivity training have been developed with the intent of having greater impact on and appeal to the officer.

Police identity workshops utilizing role-playing, cognitive inputs, simulation of critical incidents, personality measurement feedback, and social psychology including non-verbal behaviors were designed to impact the difficulty of officers in dealing with the psychological pressures arising from their authority role and to help them deal with the constant assault on their personal identities (19).

Another recent approach involves the team building format. In this paradigm a group of officers is trained as a unit to counter the tension and loneliness of facing hazardous situations and to provide group supports. Included are inputs on the effects of stress, and psychological tests are also used to enhance the individual's self-perception. Self-disclosure is emphasized as a tension reduction technique and simulated tactical utilized for desensitization purposes (7).

Crisis intervention training and inter-personal conflict management training (2,37) have gained considerable popularity in many police agencies. In addition to teaching officers to cope with crises in the field, the intervention training provides them with skills to reduce personal stress and to prevent

injury in disturbance situations. Inter-personal conflict training also focuses on the ambivalence of the policeman's role in regard to making arrests as opposed to doing "social work". Additionally, the ambiguity of his role as generalist or as specialist is explored.

In addition to the approaches and programs discussed thus far, it would seem desirable that more attention be paid in police departments in an organized way to approaches and programs having preventive value in regard to stress problems. Although physical training, self-defense, and exercise are usually highly valued in most police departments, and physical recreation activities have always been popular on an off-duty basis, the benefits of these approaches for stress reduction have not been fully utilized as specific vehicles to enhance coping among police personnel. Ideally, programs should be designed which recognize the legitimacy of on-duty exercise and recreation as useful vehicles for stress reduction. In addition there should be planned rest and "recuperation" opportunities and facilities for officers serving in high-stress divisions and extra-hazardous assignments.

Proper nutritional balance and diet significantly affecting body chemistry and functioning have long been ignored by both health professionals and lay people alike. However, recent research studies increasingly point to the significance of the biochemistry of metabolism nutrients to physiological and psychological well-being (41). In addition to providing personnel with applied training in this area, Department cafeterias, dispensing machines, and other food sources would need to comply with up to date precepts of healthful nutrition in providing food. One related research study among many in this area found that nicotinic acid could block stress-induced mobilization of fatty acids and prevent an increase in plasma triglycerides (21).

A recent trend in organizational strategies has included a movement toward participative management and the team policing model. These concepts may provide for greater involvement and participation of employees at all levels in the organization. Personnel participating in problem identification, problem-solving performance evaluation, and decision-making, increases the likelihood of job satisfaction and reduction in some of the underlying organizational stresses otherwise active.

Administrators in the Los Angeles Police Department have long been aware of the stresses and strains inherent in police work and the need for specific programs to confront the myriad human problems which result. For the past six years, the Department has had a full-time psychologist and a counseling program available to its employees and families for personal, marital, and job-related problems (36). Individuals may come to the Department Psychologist's Office on a voluntary, self-referred basis knowing it is confidential and off-the record. However, officers may also be referred through channels by supervisors or managers on a non-confidential basis. This typically involves a complaint against an officer or some difficulty or inability to functioning on the job. Because of limited staff resources, the counseling provided tends to be short-term and crisis-oriented with provisions for referral out to other community resources if longer-term help is indicated. In most instances, it has been found that one to eight sessions seem adequate to deal with the presenting problem situations. In addition to individual and marital counseling, there are programs for drinking abuse problems, a discussion group for officers' wives, and a counseling group for officers identified as liability-prone.

Recently, considerable fascination and attention have been focused on physiological approaches affecting stress levels and relaxation. One such program involves neuromuscular relaxation as a form of stress conditioning (11). This technique attempts to train individuals to recognize and control muscular stress by progressive relaxation techniques which serve to reduce residual tension (13).

A related innovative approach is currently being designed for implementation in L.A.P.D. which will utilize biofeedback techniques for stress management. In collaboration with outside expert consultants the Department will participate in a three-year research project to demonstrate the feasibility of training officers to control their physical responses through conditioning of autonomic functions. Theoretically, this should raise the individual's stress tolerance level and lead to better decision-making in high stress situations, and in improved overall functioning. Feeding back signals of officers' muscle tension, skin conductivity, blood pressure, pulse rate, and body temperature will allow them to learn to better control these physiological functions on the job and in stress situations. Recruits as well as experienced field officers will be used in this experiment for comparison purposes and control groups will be utilized for inter-correlation of significant variables. Officers in the experimental groups will be trained on the biofeedback equipment for approximately 20 hours over a period of several months. At the end of this time, the machines should no longer be necessary for the learned responses to have become permanent.

If this program proves successful, it may well open the door to a whole host of additional possibilities which combine physiological training parameters with cognitive and behavioral modes which can result in more effective ways of helping officers cope with the many strains which exist in their unique high-stress occupation.

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