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Methods for Reducing Stress in a Small Police Department

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Introduction

When the manifestations of stress expose themselves in a socially inappropriate way, or when the person or group recognize their stress as potentially hazardous, the psychologist, psychiatrist, and social worker may be requested to assist the individual in his efforts to reduce the level of stress. If the outward manifestations of stress are violent, either actual or potential, those most prepared to deal with the person under stress are usually not, because of large caseloads, classified as first responders to answer the call for help.

In most cases, it is the police officer who provides that "first strike" assistance. The officer may have been fortunate enough to have received some formal training which addressed the techniques for reducing stress which threatens the mental, as well as the overall physical health of the citizen. More often than not, the police officer will act on his best assessment of the situation in combination with good common sense. If the officer is to accomplish anything, he must attempt to fully understand the sometimes many facets of the immediate problem.

A competent, sincere, and dedicated police officer may very well leave his clients in peace, but not without having been contaminated by some of the stress "given off" by the clients. Add to these stressors, the myriad of crisis situations which the officer will face during the rest of his tour, and you will, in all likelihood, see an officer returning home fully endowed with many of the stressors he endeavored to bring out in the open, so that he may better serve the public.

If any credence can be lent to a theory contending that officers frequently absorb some of the stressors "given off" by their clients, then we might assume that stressors resulting from the officer's personal affairs are firmly entrenched in his mind.

I am pleased that those stressful aspects of police work are being identified by police administrators through the use of professional social researchers. Equally, if not more pleasing to me is the recognition of the existence of stress within the smaller staffed police departments of this nation.

What, then, constitutes a small police department? What are the attitudes that permeate a department of such size, and, if stressful for the officer, what is the technique either designed or inherent by which stress is reduced?

## Small Community Police Departments

A small police department can deliver to its consumers of service, practically all of the services that the traditionally large department can, if efficiently managed. Ideally, the type of service that a community receives from its police has a relationship to the type of service that the community wants. Many communities are so small that the business of law enforcement is run by volunteers. When the crime rate increases, and the request for service increase, then the need arises for full-time people on a salaried basis. The small department may be staffed by one officer to twenty-five officers. This force is usually supplemented by part-time men and women who may or may not receive compensation for their work. Women, apart from recent changes in their role in police departments, usually assume the duties of a crossing guard, clerk, or dispatcher.

Most departments of such size find their office in the community's town hall. It is usually placed with the fire department so that police and firemen brush shoulders daily. Privacy in these combination police-fire stations is minimal, and extremely hard to secure.

## Personnel Characteristics

The officer that comprises such a department could have been employed in several ways. He may have been a native son who carries the respect of the community. He may also be the man that, as a boy, may have caused more trouble to the community than he will solve in his police career. When, if ever, he is formally interviewed for the job, the chances are very good that he is already known by his interviewers. Some more forward thinking communities may advertise for the position and administer a small examination to the applicant before consideration is given to an interview. If the police department is just being formulated, the volunteers may be considered for the job over all other applicants. If the department is already established, then new officers may be drawn from the reserve or auxillary force.

The type of person that applies for such a position may do so for reasons many and varied. Some join because of a desire to help people in need. Others, needing to be invested with some authority, will seek the job. Some have seen what they believe to be an accurate description of the job on television; it stimulates them; they are fascinated with castastrophe and all of the alleged glamour that comes with being in a position to save a life or apprehend a dangerous felon.

Most applicants who have never been involved in law enforcement, believe that their proper function is to protect the community by either deterring or eventually apprehending the dangerous criminal. Few, if any, will understand that their role is to maintain order in the community by admonishing the juvenile, securing safe quarters for the inebriated, and making sure that the merchant locked the doors to his establishment. Rarely is the legal process invoked, and an officer can work his entire career without having fired a shot.

If the department is established with a squad of full-time officers, the chances are very good that the ranking officers are older, native sons who

were hired under a less severe set of standards than the new officer now in his charge. The senior officer became such for several reasons. He may have been blessed with a personality that is appreciated by the citizens he serves, and the men with whom he works. He may have, in one isolated incident, performed his duty in a outstanding fashion. He may be the man with the longest time on the force.

### Organization

From an organizational standpoint, a chart may not be available. Everyone in the community knows how and where each officer stands in the department, and a chief's position could be damaged if he formally presented the lines of authority. The patrol is, as in any department, the backbone of the force. The patrol officer is the "first line" enforcer of the law, or maintenance man of the status quo. The officer usually covers his tour alone in a patrol vehicle. When on duty, he may be the only "man" in town to protect citizens and preserve order. He seldom has a man on duty with him that could be called a supervisor to oversee his activities and guide his actions. No vestige of specialization such as detective, prosecutor, canine officer, or photographer exists. The department must rely upon other departments, i.e. state police and more urban departments for auxiliary services such as laboratory work and latent fingerprint lifting. Specialization in a small department can only be developed at the expense of the patrol force. If specialization is unjustified it can severely damage the manpower available for patrol, and trained specialists who have limited opportunity to apply their knowledge.

### Community Attitudes

Small police departments, I would assume, serve a small, sometimes "tightly knit" population that develops a feeling or attitude towards the men who staff their department. Some citizens feel that the police are a necessary evil, and that they could perform the officer's duties more efficiently than the person currently in charge. Other citizens have confidence in their department, but cannot easily articulate exactly why. The community which has a small population will have a small police department because the requests for service are infrequent. It could be conjectured that the smaller the community, the greater the visibility and therefore, the greater the opportunity to criticize the police action taken in a certain instance. A majority of the residents of the city of Chicago could hardly be less aware, or less concerned about the mistakes made by an officer in attempting to separate the violent husband from the hurt, but still loving wife. The same circumstances in a small community would be vigorously discussed, and dangerously amplified by its residents.

Small police departments usually operate on budgets that fall short of living up to their expected capabilities. A poor administrator can "float" his department for many years without ever progressing to meet increasing demands. Such a lack of concern for the men who work for him can eventually lead to employee dissatisfactions which eventually lead to low quality service. Only the entire elimination of certain power elites will bring the department back to a courteous and dependable service.

The activities of a small department differ from those in a large department primarily in quantity of incidents. The quality of action taken

depends greatly upon the frequency of which a particular incident occur. When a duty is routinized, it is far easier to efficiently accomplish the task and to go one step further in satisfying the community. Compensating for the lack of experience that an officer might have in a small department when a major incident occurs, is the infrequency with which these major events occur thus enabling the officer to devote more time to the case. The time between events requiring police action may be long. Small police departments will frequently have "time on their hands" which contribute greatly to boredom. In a small department, boredom may cause officers to over-react to minor situations. So many sensitive incidents requiring cautious and deliberate approaches may be completely mismanaged because an officer "jumped the gun" and produce more of a problem than that originally posed.

### Designed Stress Reduction

When, during the course of his work, an officer identifies stress in a fellow officer as a problem, several things may occur. Assuming that most officers on the department are aware of the man's personality characteristics, he may be informed that he ought to slow down his pace and not internalize the problems placed before him by the citizenry he serves. This friendly piece of advice may lead the officer to a point where he will design those elements that help in the process of reducing stress. If his behavior is noted by his supervisors, then some action from the supervisory level may be forthcoming to help him reduce stress.

When this writer was appointed as Chief of Police in his twenty-third year, he came to the job with few of the stresses that officers with fifteen years' service already had. It therefore took, and will take, many months to understand some of the stressors present in the two police departments.

Many daily attempts are made to reduce some of the stress experienced by officers. These attempts are subconscious in nature, as opposed to being contrived. They are attempts to promote communications, purchase and maintain certain required equipment as often requested by the officers. If the Chief of Police indicates a willingness to detach himself from whatever he is doing during the day to listen to an officer, communications laterally, and vertically, will usually flourish. The Chief of Police, and in some cases supervisory personnel in a small department are at an advantage in the category of communications. They have the opportunity to know their man well. His family, his business dealings, personality characteristics, and that which particularly disturbs him, are facets of an officer's life that are well worth knowing. Increased communications with supervisors while improving information on police operations has provided valuable information concerning individual officers. An officer may feel greater latitude in discussing personal crises with his sergeant than with the Chief of Police.

Very early in my position, complaints of frustration were subtly presented to me by the officers. They were fearful that I was there to provide the "new broom", and it naturally followed that until officers received some ideas concerning my expectations of them, no one would enter into situations or take certain actions that might severely jeopardize their job. Therefore, it was necessary to explain, in written form, my objectives for the agency, as well as rules and regulations by which the officers would operate. The failure to adequately fulfill department objectives does not usually jeopardize an

officer's job. The failure to abide by reasonable rules and regulations could jeopardize an officer's position. So both objectives and rule and regulations were explained to the fullest extent possible, for if an officer is ambivalent about rules and regulations, stress will be his. He knows he must act in certain situations, but if he is not sure of what is expected of him, his approach will be with the discomfoting fear that the chief may not approve. If policy is written, explained, and reasonable, then the officer has full knowledge that he will be supported by his chief, and he will be more comfortable in taking actions in the future.

When an order is given, a full explanation as to how it can best be carried out is a most important task. To be more current, "where you are coming from" is a matter of great concern to an officer whose work is carefully scrutinized in the small department.

Any athletic coach, through the use of visual aids, training procedures, and films of opposing teams, will do much for his players if he can reduce the element of the unknown prior to his team taking the field. Films of opposing teams and other visual aids prepare the athlete's faculties for understanding and becoming more comfortable when coming into contact with that previously unknown adversary.

The fact that a police officer has no way of predicting the actions a client might take serves to enhance stress. The untrained officer responding to a medical emergency may be rendered useless because of his lack of expertise in the field of first aid. He may do much to harm the situation and cause unnecessary embarrassment to the department. Clear and concise statements of policy and procedure, together with training, will, and has done, much to reduce levels of anxiety. Stress, in these situations, may be felt not only when the request for service presents itself, but while waiting for it to occur.

Departments with small numbers of personnel often have trouble contacting another officer to back him up when he is dealing with either complicated cases or situations where there is a great danger of violence erupting. It is therefore important to see that patrol beats be arranged so as to provide coverage for each other. Knowing that no one is available to help, provides another stressor.

Where policy and procedure fail to cover the unusual situation, the officer may need to turn to someone who can provide some definitive help. Departments with small numbers of personnel cannot provide a desk sergeant to guide and advise. If this be the case, some provision must be made to have a ranking officer present to answer your questions. The use of a tone pager has kept me in touch constantly with any officer on the department, but above all, it produces a quieting effect -- you are available to him.

The promotion of an officer to the position of prosecutor can do much to reduce payments for court appearances by officers. Once properly trained and experienced, he can provide valuable legal guidance during courtroom proceedings. By law, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts allows police officers to prosecute certain cases in the district court. The fear of saying the wrong word at the wrong time, and the possibility of forgetting to testify to certain facts, presents a significant stressor. The prosecutor can guide the officer by requesting certain information, and calling some finer points to his attention.

A department administrator, armed with good channels of communication, can assist the officer who has been stressed by a problem child in his family, an unfaithful wife, and limited career potential. Counselling techniques should be utilized whenever possible. I have found that good listening is sometimes all that an officer under stress needs or wants.

Upon my arrival at work, all officers performed the same function, that of patrol. Some specialization was necessary, so positions of prosecutor, inspector, photographer and identification man, canine officer, juvenile officer, and cruiser maintenance man were filled. Several job classifications brought with them additional stressors, but these stressors served to motivate the officer and after becoming settled in these positions, a majority of them disappeared.

A small police department possesses some inherent advantages when dealing with stress. Total identification and elimination of stressors a long distance away. Such a department, with a small caseload, enables the human element to be opened and explored amongst its personnel. Some prefer to deny that stressors exist, which could hardly be the case. In any event, communication and appropriate action applied in either an overt or covert manner is a technique aimed in the right direction. In the small police department, a Chief of Police can utilize the facilities of local mental health associations to help treat an officer's individual problem. Not only is he able to make the proper contacts, he is also able to maintain an ongoing progress check with his officer.

Small police departments do not usually have funds to support an "in-house" counsellor for officers overwhelmed by stress. They must use available facilities in the jurisdiction that they serve. It is my belief that departments possessing the funds to initiate anti-stress programs, should do so. From the standpoint of economy, the amount of money spent on programs of Workman's Compensation for illnesses directly related to stress might be significantly reduced if agencies begin identifying stressors and eliminate them. Of greatest importance is the elimination of stress in the individual officer, who might experience greater longevity and perform the task of serving the public more courteously and efficiently.



**END**