

Not So Obvious Police Stress

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Police officers have one of the highest suicide rates in the nation, probably the highest. They have a high divorce rate, about second in the nation. They are problem drinkers about twice as often as the general population. These facts are warning signals.

Researchers use suicide, divorce and alcoholism rates as three key indexes of stress in a group of people; police work clearly is stressful. Hans Selye, the foremost researcher in stress in the world, said that police work is "the most stressful occupation in America even surpassing the formidable stresses of air traffic control."

One study in Detroit concluded that the single, most important factor that led to a police suicide was marital discord. Studies in New York show that almost all officers are intoxicated at the time they commit suicide. The three indexes of stress are intertwined for police officers. Police officials need to recognize the importance of these facts and improve conditions for their officers.

Chronic Stress

Police stress is not always unique nor obvious. Almost any single stressor in police work can be found in another occupation. What is unique is all the different stressors in one job. Many people see the dangers of acute stressors such as post shooting trauma and have programs dealing with them. They are easy to see because of the intense emotional strain a person suffers. But what about the not so obvious, chronic stressors; are they important?

The lessons from the war crimes committed at MyLai in the Vietnam War help answer the question. In 1972 Dr. M. Scott Peck was the chairman of a committee of three psychiatrists appointed by the Army Surgeon General to study the MyLai incident and recommend research to understand its causes. Why did these Americans kill five to six hundred unarmed civilians? Dr. Peck believes that chronic stress was an important factor leading two hundred men to commit this American atrocity.

Chronic stress has at least two effects on people. First, prolonged stress causes people to regress. Their psychological growth reverses, and they become more immature. They rapidly become more childish and primitive. A common example is a sick person who is miserable and in pain for several days. Any wife will agree that her husband becomes self-centered, whiny and irritable; he expects constant attention and care. He behaves like a young, selfish child. People naturally regress during chronic discomfort.

Second, chronic stress numbs people's sensitivity. They can't stand to continually see human misery. They must stop feeling or they won't survive. The mind has this defense mechanism so people can continue working in horrible situations. If they kept their normal sensitivity, they would fall apart. As they become insensitive to their own suffering, they become insensitive to the suffering of others. When treated with indignity they lose not only a sense of their own dignity but also the dignity of others. The pain of others stops bothering them, and they are no longer bothered when they hurt others.

The men in the Charlie Company had suffered chronic stress for months prior to going into MyLai. Their actions were primitive and self-centered; the veneer of civilization was gone. They killed unarmed civilians with insensitivity and no regret. The two effects of

stress were obvious in their deeds. Chronic stress doesn't account for all that happened at MyLai, but it was an important contributor. The parallel to police work is obvious and very important for police officials.

Police officers encounter stressors in call after call which sap their strength. Debilitation from this daily stress accumulates making officers more vulnerable to traumatic incidents and normal pressures of life. The weakening process is often too slow to see; neither a person nor his friends are aware of the damage being done.

Programs for acute stress are important but are limited in their value for two reasons. First, they are a reaction to trauma that has occurred; an officer is already suffering. Important support can be given to the officer, but almost nothing can be done to prevent an incident that causes trauma. How does a police official stop an officer's partner from being killed next to him? Second, few officers are involved in traumatic incidents in a year compared with the whole department which meets stress in call after call.

If chronic stressors are identified, then police officials can take proactive steps; they can do something before an officer becomes another suicide statistic. Departments should stop making artificial distinctions between job-related and personal problems; they are interwoven and contribute to each other. The end result is a group of people under the greatest stress in any job in America.

The Not So Obvious Stressors

What are the chronic stressors of day to day police work? They vary among departments, shifts and people. Some are common and need to be named. This article describes only three sources of repeating stress. It doesn't discuss all police stress, but it gives the gist about obscure stress.

Traffic Stops

Police officers stop cars during a week for various reasons. They may hear excuses to gain their sympathies or indignities to demean them. A certain percentage of the people in the stops try to kill or injure the officers, yet officers are expected to be friendly at best or neutral at worst. A common view of police work is that we are all members of the community working for the safety and prosperity of everyone. Even in the traffic stop the police officer is expected to work with the driver for the good of the community. After all isn't the driver a good person who has merely made a small, temporary mistake?

If an officer approaches a car with a friendly attitude, his guard is down. He can't keep his defenses up and view a person as his friend at the same time. People are on guard against those they view as adversaries, not friends. If an officer continually approaches cars with a friendly attitude, the chief will eventually get a call that one of his officers is lying in a pool of blood on the street.

If an officer approaches a driver thinking this might be the one who attacks him, he will come across as rude, gruff and uncaring. It's hard to be on guard for your life and appear friendly at the same time. When an officer approaches cars with a guarded attitude, the chief will get a call that he has a cynical, brutal cop who has no business serving the community.

The officer is in a dilemma. Considering someone a friend or an enemy produces opposite mental states; a person can't hold both attitudes at the same time. He is caught in a double bind, a no win situation. For an officer it's a chronic stress with a cumulative effect of breaking down his defenses and making him a prey to other pressures and to diseases such as

ulcers. The stress of double bind situations is well documented in psychological research.

Professional vs. Military Conflict

A police department is both a professional and military organization; these two aspects oppose each other. The classic professions of history are doctor, lawyer and minister. They require a basic education, a bachelor's degree, and a three year professional school of about 90 hours. The professional is then licensed and endorsed by an agency. He is considered to be an expert in his field and is expected to use his expertise for the good of his clients. He has much discretion in how he serves the people who call upon him. The military is opposite. The people are well trained, but the chain of command tells them how to do almost everything. Orders, rules and regulations cover every facet of life in the military. Everything is done by the book with very little discretion left for people doing their jobs.

Police officers aren't professionals in the classic sense, but they are similar. An officer must have a minimum amount of education; he then goes through an academy and field training. He is commissioned and in some places licensed. His duty is to use his training and authority for the good of the community. When someone calls the police, he expects the officer to make decisions to handle the situation. The officer decides what he can and should do, but he runs head-on into orders, rules and regulations. Police departments have learned from experience the value of having procedures and policies. Yet the events of life are too complicated to handle by preset rules; people must evaluate situations and make decisions.

The problem comes for the officer when he is at the scene of a call. After learning the facts he will know what course of action is needed to meet the needs of the people. Often that course does not follow procedures. If he follows procedures exactly, he knows he won't fully help the people and is frustrated. The people will think he is shirking his responsibility and will be frustrated. If the officer follows his own judgement, he is taking a risk. If everything goes well, he is safe, but if things go sour, he is subject to discipline because he didn't follow procedures. The community and department expect officers to use judgement, but when they do, there is a danger they will be disciplined - another double bind.

Isolation

When people are isolated, they become disoriented and confused. Their behavior changes drastically; they can become apathetic to the point of illness or death. Social isolation in police officers fosters the attitude that it's us against them. They view the public like the soldiers at MyLai viewed those civilians; they're the enemy. As officers become socially isolated they suffer effects similar to physical isolation. The effects of social isolation are most prominent in the first six years of an officer's career.

Officers tend to associate only with other officers. When they go out with another couple, it is usually another police couple. Officers want their spouses to go to police parties with them, but when their spouses want them to go to their office party, the answer is no. They make excuses that they don't want to hear the old ticket story again or they just don't fit in.

Police learn street wisdom; they develop confidence in themselves to handle situations in practical ways. They begin to look down on others because they don't have savvy in the real world. Police mostly see the seamy side of life that other people don't see, and since other people don't understand this side of life, officers feel superior. Ironically they are the ones who are losing real world wisdom; the world isn't comprised only of criminals

and fools. They judge the world from a limited perspective and see everything with a jaundiced eye.

Police work lacks balance. A doctor loses a patient today but brings a baby into the world tomorrow. Most jobs have a healthy balance; the good things are mixed with the bad. Not so in police work. In call after call officers only see criminals or people making fools of themselves. The police aren't called to a reunion party when everyone is doing right. They are called when someone gets drunk and decides he can whip anyone around. The officer making the arrest sees the man then, not when he is working hard for his family. It's not amazing that some officers think that ninety-eight percent of the people in the world are not good, and the two percent who are good are the police.

The examples given are stresses that police don't normally recognize. Anyone in police work can think of common frustrations such as seeing criminals getting out of jail on bond in a short time or being released completely. The point is there are chronic stresses in police work, and departments need to do something about them, not just the obvious traumatic incidents.

What Can Be Done?

Police officials should stop distinguishing between personal problems and job-related problems. Many departments look closely into the personal lives of applicants during background investigations. Departments won't hire people who have major personal problems; they understand the importance of a person's personal life in police work. After the person is hired a strange thing happens. Many departments forget the importance of a police officer's personal life when it comes time to help them. The fact remains that police work affects an officer's personal life, especially the family, and his personal life affects job performance. Any separation of the two is unreal.

Officials can't stop stress in police work, but they can recognize it and help officers in three areas. First, they can provide help to individual officers. Second, the family life can be helped. Third, the stress caused by the police organization itself can be reduced.

Direct help for individual officers can come in many forms. Every large department should have a psychologist and a chaplain for the officers and ensure that insurance plans have good provisions for outpatient counseling with outside psychologists, psychiatrists and therapists. Doubly important is confidentiality; the department should not know when an officer uses insurance for counseling.

Often programs for individuals also help reduce organizational stress. When a department provides a psychologist and a chaplain, the officers see that someone at the top does understand their problems and is trying to help. This perception is much better than the attitude of many officers that no one at the top cares; in fact they are out to get the officers. Departments need to have policies for transferring people temporarily for family problems. The inconveniences of helping an officer for a short time far outweigh the problems of handling a police suicide or a lawsuit because an officer exploded during a critical call.

Traumatic incidents such as post shooting trauma are acute stressors but should be mentioned. Services that help the acute, individual stress of traumatic incidents also help chronic, organizational stress. When an officer shoots and kills someone, he isn't given time to deal with his trauma. He must protect the crime scene, make arrests, notify the proper people and tell officials what happened. He maintains the image of being in complete control. Usually he has to tell the story several times to his supervisors, homicide, internal affairs and any special sections in the department. Other officers have their jobs to do and can't take time to support the officer personally.

The department can help with procedures that support the officer. Get other officers to handle the work as soon as possible and get the officer out of the public eye. Don't make him relive the incident three to six times in official interviews. Let everyone needing a complete story interview him at one time. Even better, let one section interview him and get all the information needed for the whole department. Start a traumatic incidents corps or a procedure in which someone can be present to give personal support to the officer. A traumatic incident corps is comprised of officers who have previously been in traumatic incidents. They are trained to help officers going through trauma and are called immediately to the side of an officer involved in such an incident. The members of the traumatic incident corps are volunteers who help in addition to their normal duties.

Officers and supervisors should be taught about the symptoms and effects of job stress. Proactive training helps ward off stress when officers encounter it. When an officer suffers from stress, reactive counseling and training such as biofeedback should be available.

Departments can reduce officer isolation and do community relations at the same time by supporting community activities such as youth athletics or charitable organizations. Official support could be given for officers to be coaches and referees in leagues. Officials should actively look for positions on boards of directors for community organizations such as mental health associations and seek to place officers as representatives of the Police Department. Police will get balance in their lives and citizens will better understand the police. A cooperative attitude will grow on both sides.

Family life can be helped in several ways. Counseling through the psychologist and chaplain should be available for family members. Orientation seminars for spouses will let them learn about the department first hand. They don't understand the department and often have a biased opinion after hearing their spouses gripe. Police appreciation dinners sponsored by the community and the department are excellent. They give officers and their families a chance to sit down in a congenial atmosphere with the people who appreciate them.

The police organization is very important in the lives of its officers and often creates stress unwittingly. Orders and regulations tend to sound oppressive in their pronouncements when they don't need to. If a passage mainly gives information for handling a situation, then why word all of it in the imperative voice? Save the imperative for imperative orders. Orders and regulations can be reviewed by someone trained to see the human impact that certain wordings have on people.

Poor communication causes chiefs and officers as much grief as anything. Departments can improve by having a consultant design a complete system of communication. A simple well-written newsletter for information, not propaganda, bridges the communication gap. In short, the organization needs to remove its own problems before pointing at individual officers and putting all the blame on them.

Police officers are suffering from stress, and one result is lessened service to the community. All police stress needs to be defined and combated, not just a few obvious ones. The task is difficult, but the rewards for doing it surpass the effort.

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