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Nibbled to Death by Ducks: Surviving deadly-voice encounters

by Pat Robinson, PH.D.



We've learned a lot about officer survival in the last twenty years. In particular, we've learned the importance of preparing officers for the stress of deadly-force street encounters through "stress inoculation." We train the body by subjecting officers to measured and progressive induced stress on the firing range, so that they will be able to fire quickly and accurately under the immense stress of a real-life shooting. Colonel Dave Grossman has made a career of teaching officers how to have a "bulletproof" mind, so that if they are faced with the unthinkable, they'll still be able to win. We all train officers to keep fighting, no matter what—to refuse to give up, regardless of the circumstances. We would no more think of sending an officer out on the street without some form of survival training than without handcuffs and a gun.

We teach officers to survive deadly force encounters even though, thankfully, most of them never have to test the training. We also teach officers to perform well in other high-risk situations, such as pursuit driving, building-clearing, and so on. But if you asked most cops, I'd bet they describe the lights-and-sirens calls as the fun ones. Those are the calls that leave you breathless but exhilarated—dancing with death but incredibly alive. The Code 3 calls keep us coming back for more.

It's the other ones that wear us down. The stress that leads to high divorce rates and hard drinking I suspect has less to do with lights and sirens and more to do with knowing that every day on the job you can count on someone calling you an obscene name. It comes from daily being told you're a racist, or that you ought to be arresting drug dealers instead of giving law-abiding citizens speeding tickets, or being told to wait out of sight of patients to interview the clinic doctor who requested police for a suspected prescription fraud.

Ask any cop whether he'd rather respond to an armed robbery in progress or a neighbor trouble. I'm betting the armed robbery wins, hands down. And maybe that's as it should be, since the accumulation of daily hostility ruins more lives than a robber's bullet.

That day-in-day-out stress does more than mar individuals. It can tarnish departments and sour relations with the public we serve. Think what happens when you've had three calls in a row where the citizens you dealt with were so belligerent and obnoxious that you wished you could write them all for "contempt of cop." Do you approach the fourth call with the same openness and potential for empathy as you did the first? If you do, you should put in for sainthood because you're a far better person than the rest of us.

We all find ourselves swallowing the retort when the citizen tells us “I pay your salary!” or accuses us of issuing a citation only because he’s male...or female...or black...or white...or whatever. You know the joke about what a cop really means when using the word “Sir” as in, “Step out of the car, Sir.”

You can stop yourself from saying the words that accurately reflect your feelings, but it’s harder to stop the nonverbal tone of voice, body language, and other clues that give it away. Couple that with the need to be alert for danger and always in control of any interaction, and it’s hardly surprising that the most frequent complaint about officers is that they are “rude and overbearing.” Most of those complaints come in an officer’s first five years on the street. After a time, most officers learn one strategy or another for masking their true feelings, but at what cost? I recall when I was a rookie asking a veteran officer how he dealt with the verbal abuse. He laughed and said, “Drink heavily.”

Even if you don’t drink yourself into oblivion, accumulated stress leads inevitably to irritability—and if you don’t display it on the street, you surely will at home. Just ask your significant other...if you’re still on speaking terms, that is.

Can we inoculate officers against the emotional wear and tear of everyday stress as we do against the sudden and immense stress of a deadly-force encounter? I believe we can and must. We lose twice as many officers to suicide each year as we do to murder. And that’s not counting the “slow suicides” of alcoholism and heart disease.

Stress inoculation is not a new idea. It was pioneered in the 1960s by Dr. Donald Meichenbaum, and was designed not only to address acute stressors such as officer-involved shootings, but also chronic stressors, such as the nibbled-to-death-by-ducks stress of Mr. Congeniality mouthing off. The classical procedure involves three steps:

- Conceptualization
- Skill Acquisition and Rehearsal
- Application and Follow-Through

Conceptualization

In the conceptualization phase, the individual identifies what specific things trigger stress and how he or she has responded. For example, an officer may find it particularly distressing to be called a racist, and may respond by becoming defensive and trying to persuade his accuser that his actions have nothing to do with race. Part of this phase is to assess how effective one’s current coping strategies are. Think of it as the Dr. Phil question, “How’s that working for you?” Generally, if your strategy is working, that situation is probably not contributing much to your stress load, but sometimes you have to identify a response and acknowledge its ineffectiveness before you can change it.

Skill Acquisition and Rehearsal

This phase involves figuring out an alternative to what doesn’t work and then practicing the new behavior. Sometimes all you have to do is find a different response, but sometimes this phase involves redefining the stressor.

To take our previous example, initially, the officer was taking the accusation of racism as a personal attack and responding defensively. What if instead, the officer comes to see the accusation (assuming it’s unwarranted) as a manipulative technique on the part of the suspect, or even the suspect’s only means to have any power in the situation? By redefining the accusation, he robs it of its power to wound, because he no longer sees it as a personal attack—so he no longer needs to defend against it with the same emotional charge. Instead, he can find other ways to respond that will deflect the attack and refocus the interaction.

Application and Follow-Through

In the final phase, the person practices applying these new coping skills to progressively more challenging situations. How better to do this (you knew I’d get here eventually) than in scenario-based training? Just as we use scenario-based training to teach officers how to safely navigate the dangers of clearing a building or making a vehicle contact, why can’t we also use it to teach them how to respond safely to chronic hostility on the street?

During the civil rights movement in the 1960s, activists practiced responding non-violently to verbal and physical assaults. Many of the activists were young and their

natural response was to fight if someone attacked them or called them vicious names. They had to be taught a different physical response, and they had to practice it under controlled conditions before they were allowed to participate in the marches.

That approach worked—because the stressors were of short duration. After the march, the marchers would go home (or get bailed out of jail) and return to their normal lives. For police, the stress is our normal lives. We cannot simply tell recruits, “Don’t take it personally when someone calls you a name. Be professional.” That’s like telling the recruit, “Don’t worry about killing another human being. Just shoot as you’re trained to.” Colonel Grossman knows that doesn’t work for deadly force—the officer may shoot as trained, but without proper stress inoculation, the officer may not survive intact, even if he or she loses not a single drop of blood. It doesn’t work for everyday encounters, either. The officer may use professionally appropriate words, but the non-verbal communication will be clear and may generate a complaint. And the officer will go home at the end of the shift looking for a good, stiff drink or three to untie the knot in his stomach.

We care enough about our officers to inoculate them against the stress of a deadly-force encounter that only a small percentage of officers will ever experience. Shouldn’t we also inoculate them against a stress—potentially just as deadly—that every single one will face nearly every day?

About the Author:

*After 15 years of university teaching and nine years of law enforcement experience (in that order), **Pat Robinson** retired from the Madison, Wisconsin Police Department in 2000 and was named Law Enforcement Education Director for Wisconsin. A few years later, she moved to Arizona to consult and train full time, but the offer to coordinate the design and building of two state-of-the-art training centers drew her back to Wisconsin. She is presently the Director of Health and Public Safety Development and Interim Dean of Criminal Justice for Fox Valley Technical College in Appleton, WI.*

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Take advantage of the following CJI course to learn more about stress management:

Coping With Law Enforcement **STRESS**



February 28th, 2008

**West Memphis Police Department
West Memphis, AR**

May 23rd, 2008

**Independence County Sheriff’s Office
Batesville, AR**

Stress is the “wear and tear” our bodies experience as we adjust to our continually changing environment. This six-hour course will identify potential sources of stress and will illustrate ways that law enforcement can lessen its effect. Attention will be given to the agency’s role and the supervisor’s role in detecting and dealing with sources of stress.

The course will be held from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

For more information, contact:

**Kim Hendricks
(501) 570-8041
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Lt. Colonel Dave Grossman Will Once Again Present

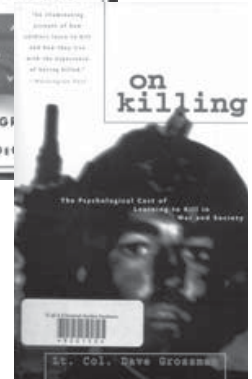
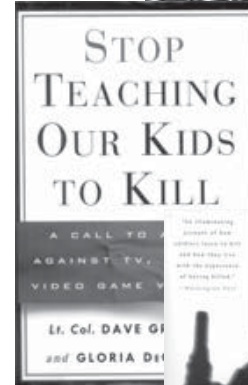
THE BULLETPROOF MIND

May 2nd, 2008
Criminal Justice Institute
Little Rock, AR

Renowned author Lt. Colonel Dave Grossman will visit the Criminal Justice Institute this spring to present **The Bulletproof Mind**, a six-hour course that addresses the psychological processes, as well as physical processes, that occur when law enforcement officers are involved in confrontational situations. This course, which will begin at 9:00 a.m. and conclude at 4:00 p.m., will be especially beneficial to tactical team members, firearm instructors, and managers and supervisors of such units.

Space for this course is limited! To reserve your spot, contact:

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