

Dealing With Stress In Law Enforcement:  
Alcoholism, Divorce and Suicide

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We live in a society that appears to have lost its moral compass in many ways (Raver, 2007).

According to Raver, violent crimes, illegal substance abuse and alcoholism pose a constant threat to our communities. Raver asserts that many people choose to deal with the stresses of everyday life by abusing alcohol and drugs. He says drug and alcohol abuse has permeated all American classes and cultures. The number of filled- to- capacity prisons and jails in America is proof that our nation has significant substance abuse problems. (Enter, 2006) This trend is affecting not only what we would consider society's criminal element, but also many seemingly "normal," "all American" families.

Law enforcement officers have traditionally been held to a higher ethical standard than their civilian counterparts. Raver (2007) says, in reality, the humanity of the men and women of law enforcement can and does sometimes lead even the most respected and devoted police officers into the chasm of alcoholism, divorce and suicide. Police departments need policies and procedures in place to assist employees in dealing with stress and other personal problems that can affect their job performance.

If you ask ten people to define stress, you'll probably get several different definitions. What one person considers stressful may pale in comparison to what another considers stressful. Raver (2007) states, "Therefore, perhaps the best way to define stress is that it is a combination of human interaction, environment, and life events, working together, to create the feeling of worry, anger, and depression." (Stress Defined section, para. 1). According to Raver, stress varies among individuals; however, it can be clearly seen in occupations identified as "high stress," such as law enforcement. Hans Selye (as cited in Constant, n.d), a renowned researcher of stress, stated that police work is "...the most stressful occupation in America even surpassing the

formidable stresses of air traffic control." With this in mind, manifestations of stress in law enforcement officers can become more relevant (Raver 2007).

According to work by Glenn, R. W., Panitch, B. R., Barnes-Proby, D., Williams, E., Christian, J., Lewis, M. W., et al (2003) (as cited in Raver, 2007), one of the most common of these manifestations is the unusually high percentage of alcoholism among police officers, in comparison to the general population. Raver (2007) suggests that alcohol related problems among law enforcement officers are generally higher than those in a cross-section of the rest of the general population of a given community. Although the statistics are somewhat unclear, clinically treated alcohol addiction rates are usually calculated to be about twice as high for police officers than for the general population in the United States ("Police Officer," n.d.) Statistics documenting alcohol abuse are less accurate; however, rates of arrest for driving under the influence of alcohol (DUI or DWI), are fairly higher for police officers than for other drivers ("Police Officer"). Despite the controversies in the interpretation of the statistics, it is generally considered evident that police officers are more vulnerable to alcohol abuse than other occupations. ("Police Officer")

Police officers deal with the effects of alcohol use and abuse every day. They respond to domestic disturbances, bar fights and a myriad of other calls each day in which alcohol has played a contributing factor. They work fatality accidents and suicides in which alcohol was a factor. It stands to reason that one might think that they would be less likely to become involved in excessive alcohol use (Raver, 2007). Raver states, however, "...there is evidence to suggest that police officers become involved in excessive alcohol consumption because they are police officers." (Alcohol Related Problems Among Police Officers section, para. 1)

Throughout history, there have been unsavory police officers; however, for the most part, officers have been held in high esteem. In recent years the image of police officers has become somewhat tarnished (Raver, 2007). Ray (as cited in Raver, 2007) states this is due in part to the typical portrayal of police officers in the media, in movies and books as corrupt individuals whose aim is to hurt rather than help civilians. The stereotype of a burned out alcoholic cop is often portrayed in movies and television shows. Raver states, “Obviously, alcohol abuse causes problems for any individual in any occupation or walk of life, but the police officer has some very unique and dangerous problems that accompany the alcohol use and misuse in their lives.” (Alcohol Related Problems Among Police Officers section, para. 2) Raver also points out that police officers face dangerous situations on a daily basis that require split second decisions, often which involve the use of deadly force. When a police officer’s reasoning ability is impaired or distorted by alcohol, his or her decisions or lack thereof can be deadly (Raver). Fortunately for police officers, the alcohol related problems have not gone unnoticed (Raver). Henry (as cited in Raver, 2007) suggests that across the law enforcement community, programs and services have been put into place to help troubled officers regain control of their lives.

According to Raver (2007), the reactions to stress can vary from person to person, even within the circle of law enforcement. Suicide can be yet another effect of stress. Tragically, each year many current and former officers struggle with the pain and memories of past traumatic events they experienced on the job. For many it is too much for them to handle and sometimes suicide is the answer (Gorski, 2002). Inglehart (as cited in Raver, 2007) stated that suicide is commonly recognized as a reaction to intense stress and demands in the lives of individuals. Some factors in a police officer’s career can have a ripple effect into their personal lives, thus causing them to take their own lives (Raver). Traumatic events such as the murder of a young child or the

senseless killing of an elderly grandmother can dwell in an officer’s mind for years to come. Couple this with the daily stress of dealing with the worst of society’s problems, along with an often strained home life, and it can be a recipe for disaster. Factors identified in suicides of police officers include the nature of the job, alcohol, troubled relationships or marriages, and the fact that police officers have a weapon readily available at all times (Lewis, n.d).

According to O’Hara and Violanti (2009), the National Surveillance of Police Suicide Study (NSOPS) was the first of its kind to study actual suicides on a daily basis across all 50 states for an entire year. This comprehensive study took place from January 1, 2008 until December 31, 2008 (O’Hara and Violanti, 2009). The following table includes the questions considered for each suicide studied by NSOPS in 2008 (O’Hara and Violanti, 2009).

<b>Questions surrounding each suicide included in the 2008 NSOPS study:</b>
When did the suicide occur?
Where did the suicide occur?
What department did the victim work for?
What was the age of the victim?
What was the rank of the victim?
How many years of service did the victim have with the department?
What was the means of suicide?
What circumstances led to the suicide?
What was the emotional state of the officer prior to the suicide?
Was there any know trauma prior to the suicide?
What statements were made by the departments and the medical examiners?

O'Hara and Violanti (2009) stated that the 2008 NSOPS study concerning police suicides concluded the age group at the highest risk for suicide was 35-39 years old. Furthermore, officers with 10-14 years of service were also at high risk (O'Hara and Violanti, 2009). NSOPS also found that 64% of police suicides that year were "a surprise." (O'Hara and Violanti, 2009)

According to reports from the Badge of Life Police Suicide Prevention Group, there were 145 police suicides in the United States in 2010 ("Badge of Life," 2010). This was a slight increase over the previous year, during which there were 143 police suicides ("Badge of Life"). The suicide rate for police officers is 17/100,000, slightly higher than the general population's rate of 11/100,000 ("Badge of Life"). According to a study by the National Association of Police Chiefs (NAPC) (as cited in Lewis, n.d.), about 300 cops annually commit suicide. That is nearly twice as many as are killed in the line of duty in the United States (Lewis, n.d.). The NAPC ascertained that most of the victims in police suicides are young males with no record of misconduct who shoot themselves while off duty (Lewis, n.d.). All too often, police officers who cannot find an escape from the pressures that accompany the career of a police officer see suicide as the only way to relieve their pain. Fortunately suicide prevention has been embraced by police agencies in many cases (Ray, 2001).

Divorce is yet another effect of the high-stress nature of a career in law enforcement. Divorce rates among law enforcement personnel are comparable to those of other high-stress professions such as doctors and lawyers ("The Home Front," n.d.). Divorce rates as high as 75% are consistently indicated in surveys of police officers ("The Home Front").

The chaotic lifestyle resulting from a career in law enforcement can place unusual stresses on families and spouses ("The Home Front," n.d.). Police wives must fill many different roles,

including: playing the role of both parents; rearranging schedules to accommodate unusual duty schedules, or simply learning to function independently (“The Home Front”). A police wife often feels locked out of her husband’s work life because of a breakdown in communication due to job commitments and pressures (“The Home Front”). These stressful feelings of isolation and frustration often escalate and set the stage for marital conflict as police wives live the lifestyle of "married singles." (“The Home Front”)

Police officers and their families often find themselves unable to participate in “normal” day to day activities. Invitations to parties must be declined, holiday gatherings are postponed, and it sometimes becomes necessary for families to separate when one member must work while the rest of the world plays (“The Home Front,” n.d.). Caring for children, social obligations, and recreational activities may become solo activities for the police wife, due to her husband’s erratic work schedule. The police officer may be sleeping all day after working the night shift, or patrolling the streets on Christmas Day, and the spouse is faced with handling family responsibilities by herself (“The Home Front”).

The divide between spouses can go beyond the physical repercussions. Officers often become emotionally detached due to a side effect of the stress encountered on the job. While on the job, the officer must often stifle feelings of anxiety, anger and frustration (“The Home Front,” n.d.). As a result, he often develops the same habit in his off-duty personality. Officers often attempt to shield their loved ones from the graphic realities they face daily. Therefore, lines of communication between husband and wife shut down naturally leaving his wife to feel somewhat excluded (“The Home Front”). Given the myriad of stresses that can be placed on

marital relationships due to a police officer's job, it is no surprise that they have a much higher divorce rate than the general population.

Although the various manifestations of stress caused by a career in law enforcement may paint a bleak picture, there are solutions available. Police officers need to find an escape from the stresses of their occupation. The support of friends and family, hobbies and exercise are just a few of the things that can relieve stress. "Two of the best methods of handling stress are exercise and hobbies." (Enter, 2006). According to Enter, exercise is one of the most effective stress relievers because it provides physical benefits as well as emotional benefits. Scott (2012) states that exercise and stress management are closely linked, and that exercise can be a tremendously helpful stress reliever for several reasons. First, exercise can reduce stress hormones such as cortisol while at the same time increasing endorphins, which are the body's feel-good chemicals. The result is a natural mood boost (Scott, 2012). According to Scott, another benefit of exercise is that the physical activity can redirect one's thoughts from the troubles in life to the activity at hand. Scott also asserts, "Because exercise and physical activity can often involve others, you can enjoy a double dose of stress-relief with the combined benefits of exercise and fun with friends," (Social Support section, para. 1). Finally, research suggests that physical activity may be linked to greater resilience to stress (Scott). Basically, those who exercise regularly may become less influenced by the stress in their lives. Therefore, exercise may provide some resistance toward future stress in addition to a way to cope with present stress (Scott).

Scott (2012) concludes that hobbies are generally considered activities for people who lead quiet, relaxed lives. However, Scott claims that, "...people with full, busy, even stressful lives may need hobbies more than the average person, and benefit greatly from having hobbies in their lives (para. 1). People who feel overwhelmed by all the stress in their lives may welcome the opportunity to spend time

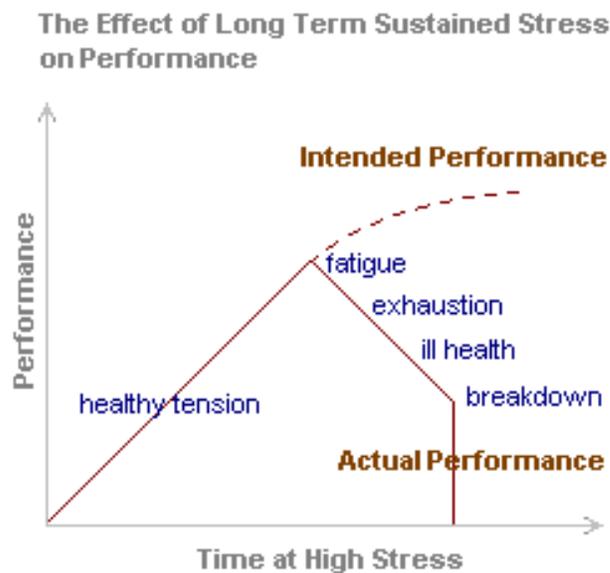
doing something they enjoy (Scott). Hobbies can provide an opportunity for officers to engage in a productive activity, rather than feeling that they are simply taking time from their busy schedule to sit and relax (Scott). Enter (2006) says hobbies are also effective because they can give officers a sense of control and satisfaction they cannot enjoy on the job where much of what happens is out of the officer's control.

Another solution to the stress-related problems faced by police officers is the provision of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). Employee Assistance Programs offer confidential counseling and self help resources for officers to assist with the effects of stress, depression, alcoholism, divorce and a multitude of other issues. The Employee Assistance Program can be accessed by employees voluntarily or mandated by administrators in the event that an employee's behavior and/or work performance has obviously been affected by a traumatic event or substance abuse problem. "Police officers are almost always high on the list of suicide groups," says Mort Feldman (as cited in Lewis, n.d., para. 17). Feldman served as a law enforcement officer in Florida for 30 years. In an interview, Feldman stated that the high rate of suicide among police officers is a national concern (as cited in Lewis, n.d.). Feldman (as cited in Lewis, n.d., para. 17) also alleged, "What is needed is to separate Employee Assistance Programs from the police department. A liaison should be established between cops and mental health associations."

According to Gorski (2002), there is a critical need to provide reliable and effective Employee Assistance Programs (EAP's) to our nation's police officers. Police officers are a vital component in our national network of emergency first responders. Police officers provide critical public safety functions. Police departments and the municipalities they serve need to

value the efforts of these professionals and recognize the stress and sufferings that they can endure in the course of serving their communities (Gorski). Gorski asserts that agencies need to utilize EAPs to help employees properly manage the personal problems that result from a career of exposure to traumatic stress.

Orpinuk (2006) believes it is certainly in the best interest of police agencies to take steps to reduce, intervene, or attempt to manage the long-term stress faced by the officers. The impact of long-term stress levels can be realized with the following graph taken from Orpinuk's work:



Orpinuk (2006) asserts that “Through regular interaction between EAPs and employees (along with family members), the employee’s performance can remain near peak levels while avoiding the catastrophic steps leading to depression and suicide, instead of the practice of intervening once the downward spiral has already started.” Orpinuk (2006) suggests the following ideas for regular, proactive programs: encourage employees to participate in frequent physical exercise

through weight training or a department softball team; or, provide social activities that are not work-related (i.e. attending ballgames, family picnics).

In conclusion, stress, alcohol abuse, marital problems and suicide are undeniable consequences of a stressful activities law enforcement officers face on a daily basis. Law enforcement agencies need to provide access to counseling and other preventive measures to ensure the health and well being of their employees and to limit potential agency liabilities. The Employee Assistant Program provides valuable resources to law enforcement agencies with regards to counseling on a wide array of issues that could negatively impact employees. It is the duty of police agencies to provide services and assistance to protect the men and women of law enforcement who sacrifice so much of themselves every day to keep the public safely out of harm's way.

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