

Job Exposure & Occupational Challenges: The Importance of Mindfulness for Today's Law Enforcement Professional

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Abstract: *Service-oriented occupations such as law enforcement often experience higher levels of stress, trauma, and negativity compared to the general population as well as other professionals. That is, first responders face numerous challenges and are additionally tasked with meeting the general needs (i.e., physical, emotional, etc.) of those they serve. Meeting the needs and expectation of civilians as well as the organizational goals can be extremely satisfying, but can also produce unforeseen vulnerabilities, concerns, and stress. Officers face job related stress from internal and external influences, as well as personal and professional pressures. If ignored, the effects of stress can have a long lasting and incapacitating effects on first responders' health and wellness (Lindsey, 2018).*

Keywords: *Compassion fatigue, law enforcement, mindfulness, police stress*

Introduction

Challenges of Police Work

Police work can be physically demanding and emotionally depleting, which can lead to the inability to relate and empathize, cynicism, and a loss of fulfillment in one's work. This, in turn, can contribute to interpersonal relationship issues, apprehension (Cocker & Joss, 2016), depression, and anxiety-related disorders (Mathieu, 2007). Law enforcement officers face myriad of concerns on many fronts, the terms "stress" and "compassion fatigue" are embedded in police work (Frank, Lambert, & Qureshi, 2017; Korre, Farioli, Varvarigou, Sato, & Kales, 2014; Lim & Kim, 2016; Webster, 2013).

Police Stress.

Overall, stress is a normal reaction to a situation that can be perceived as a threatening one. However, acute or prolonged exposure to stress can be problematic especially when the person lacks the ability to cope with stress effectively. Stress can be classified as a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources that he or she is able to mobilize. On a

personal level, stress could be dealing with family, friends, children, and/or personal finances. On a professional level, it could include deadlines, overwhelming projects, authoritarian supervisors, and potentially unrealistic expectations. When focusing on law enforcement, stress experienced by officers can include, though is not limited to (Klimley, Van Hasselt, & Stripling, 2018; Webster, 2013):

- gruesome crashes
- death, suicide, or serious injury of a co-worker
- crimes against a child/children
- personal brush with death
- deadly force incident
- homicides
- pursuits

These stressors are often referred to as "traumatic" because they are characterized by sudden, disturbing, or unusually challenging events that generate a strong emotional and/or cognitive reaction and potential death or loss (Klimley, et al., 2018). Not all stress encountered by law enforcement officers falls into this category. Other stress can fall into what could be classified as "professional stress" (Korre, et al.,

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2014). These sources may include, but are not limited to:

- organizational/administrative stressors
- daily field/job related stressors including dealing with the public
- interaction with the criminal justice system
- personal stressors including the co-existence of the officer's personal life and their professional life

Currently, law enforcement officers appear to be faced with more complex issues compared to previous generations (Palmiotto, 2016). Years of local government budget cuts triggered by the 2008 recession have decreased the ability of government agencies to respond to the needs of the public. This has resulted in law enforcement, the agency that always responds when called, fulfilling the roles vacated due to these cutbacks. Officers find themselves having to address unfamiliar issues with limited resources (Police Executive Research Forum, 2013), which can be a huge stressor.

Stress can manifest itself in psychological, physiological, and behavioral markers. Depression, increase in phobias, dramatic mood swings, sexual dysfunction, panic attacks, and a lack of focus can be indicators of elevated stress levels. Officers may experience higher than normal divorce rates, difficulties with other relationships, increased frequency and intensity of aches and pains, nausea, hair loss, great fluctuations in weight, and fatigue (Patterson, Chung, & Swan, 2012). If the symptoms of stress are not addressed, reoccurrence or revictimization can occur. When faced with a stress inducing situation, the officer may be more susceptible to the negative impacts of stress due to this revictimization.

When officers are exposed to traumatic stress, they typically experience a normal reaction to an abnormal event. Exposure to such events may not have any impact on an officer's health considering that most officers are resilient or at least, more resilient compared to the general population (Galatzer-Levy et al., 2013). However, in other situations, exposure to traumatic stress may have a negative impact on officers' health and wellness. That does not mean that officers who are affected are less resilient than those who are not, considering that a plethora of factors (e.g., unaddressed health issues, substances, family-related issues) cumulatively influence the way one reacts to traumatic stress. In some cases, exposure to traumatic stress may lead to the experience of post-traumatic stress symptoms. Those experiencing post-traumatic stress often question their sense of self-worth or self-esteem, as well as express a concern for their own personal safety (Rufo, 2016). The effects of post-traumatic stress can often impair an individual's ability to control his/her emotions leading to dramatic mood swings and

other virulent outcomes. While most experiencing post-traumatic stress will return to a "state of normal" shortly after experiencing the traumatic event, a percentage of individuals—estimated to be between ten and twenty percent—may not return to a "state of normal" without professional assistance, often weeks and sometimes a month or two after the event. (Rufo, 2016). These individuals experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that, if left untreated, can be incapacitating or result in self-destructive behavior (Rufo, 2016).

Police Compassion Fatigue

Police officers are often exposed to tragedy, loss, grief, physical and emotional pain, and human suffering. This could include comforting a family after the death of a loved one, assisting with a serious car accident victim, or hearing a victim recount the story or being physically and sexually assaulted. It is through these accounts that many officers will ultimately be exposed. These often-unforeseen occupational vulnerabilities can be classified as compassion fatigue (CF). Compassion fatigue can occur with exposure to, or interaction with, traumatized individuals (Cocker & Joss, 2016; Rafferty, 2016). Compassion fatigue has also been described as secondary exposure to traumatized individuals (Coetzee & Klopper, 2010; Stamm, 2010), and has been described as the "cost of caring" (Figley, 1995). The consequences of caring for others can deplete the physical, emotional, and spiritual self (Anewalt, 2009; Violanti, 2010). In addition, CF can lead to personal and professional performance issues (Papazoglou, 2017). The toll experienced in dealing with certain circumstances may induce high levels of stress (some self-induced), isolation, issues with problem-solving and decision-making (Covey, Shucard, Violanti, Lee, & Shucard, 2013), fatigue and general health issues, and increased physical and emotional demands (Pffifferling & Gilley, 2000).

The adverse effects of CF occur at different levels of severity and manifest in various ways. Characterizations of CF include (but are not limited to) anger or irritability, maladaptive coping skills such as the use of drugs and/or alcohol, a growing inability to feel empathy or sympathy, decreased sense of joyfulness and occupational satisfaction, disassociation, absenteeism, problems with intimacy, and issues with making decisions in patient care (Mathieu, 2007). The reality remains that those working in service-oriented occupations will at some level develop CF (Mathieu, 2007). "The most insidious aspect of compassion fatigue is that it attacks the very core of what brought us into this work: our empathy and compassion for others" (Mathieu, 2007, p.1).

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Law enforcement is a profession grounded in serving and protecting. Calls for service range from mundane to traumatic (Cross & Ashley, 2004; Henry, 2004; Slate, Johnson, & Colbert, 2007; Papazoglou, Koskelainen, Tuttle, & Pitel, 2017; Weiss et al., 2010). Working under such stressful conditions requires officers to operate in a state of vigilance and even hypervigilance, which contributes to emotional and physical exhaustion (Johnson & Jaeckle, 2018). Contradiction in the types of calls for service, in addition to the ambiguous responsibilities placed on officers, can become a nearly impossible balancing act between peacekeeper and law enforcer (Chopko, 2011; Henry, 2004).

The Role of Mindfulness in Police Work

Police officers are mandated to respond to critical incidents; however, they are supposed (and expected) to be mentally and physically prepared as well as mentally present to resolve the incidents effectively. In some instances, officers may feel mentally fixated to one of the incidents they responded to previously. That is, they are mentally engaged in an incident that already occurred, however, they are not mentally prepared or "in the zone" to respond to the next call. Therefore, officers may be pre-occupied with repetitive thoughts such as "I should have done this," "my partner would have been dead," or "I almost made the wrong decision." An officer's mind may produce hundreds or even thousands of such thoughts during a shift. Moreover, at the end of their shift officers may experience repetitive thoughts regarding experiences they had in the line of duty; that is, they may experience an inability to disengage from what they experienced in the line of duty and return to their families and maintain the role of the spouse, parent, sibling, son, or daughter.

Mindfulness practice is not new; it has been employed for thousands of years. Mindfulness refers to the non-judgmental awareness of the moment that allows one to be fully conscious and emotionally and mentally aware of the here and now (Gilbert & Tirch, 2009; Ivtzan & Hart, 2016). As aforementioned, officers may get distracted by a plethora of issues or they may be fiercely pre-occupied with matters that happened during their shift. In addition, one of the major post-traumatic stress symptoms is recurrent thoughts about a potentially life-threatening situation. The unique contribution of mindfulness practice is that it allows the person to be aware of the present moment in a compassionate way rather than a passive attention to the present moment (Chopko & Schwartz, 2009). Therefore, the person reaches a point of exploration, acceptance, and self-compassion in regard to the traumatic experience the person was exposed to. To this end, mindfulness can be practiced in many different

moments and domains of officers' lives: when having a meal, during patrol, while playing sports, and so forth. Mindfulness practice guides officers to exercise their physical senses and emotional experiences in a way that allows them to get better insight of their inner experiences and be present in the moment (Manzella & Papazoglou, 2014). Experiencing the moment with non-judgmentalness and kindness can help officers to mentally escape from self-blame, condemnation, self-criticizing thoughts, and emotions of guilt and shame that are often associated with seemingly inevitable circumstances in the line of duty (e.g., a victim is wounded in the crime scene, partner is injured in the line of duty) (Chopko, Papazoglou, & Schwartz, 2018).

Conclusion

Calls for service which induce stress and trauma, often contribute to the negative long-term consequences on the health and wellness of officers. On an individual level, officers may experience or exhibit tension, frustration, exhaustion, mental health issues, and stress-related illness. On an agency level, there may be a lack of teamwork and group cohesion, which may result in low and declining morale and increased performance issues (Ramarajan, Barsade, & Burack, 2008). This can be extremely problematic when officers require the backup of fellow officers. Issues with group cohesion or a lack of teamwork can result in dire consequences. Exposure to stress and trauma at increased rates helps to clarify why those within the law enforcement profession may be at increased risk for compassion fatigue, emotional exhaustion, burnout, depression, PTSD, and suicide (Violanti & Gehrke, 2004).

Law enforcement officers often experience the undesirable aspects of serving. Continuously experiencing these adverse aspects can leave many officers examining their career choice. Many officers believe the profession was a calling and serving others is what they were meant to do. However, over time, it becomes easy to understand why many begin to question this choice. Mindfulness practice can render officers capable of experiencing the moment in a non-judgmental and compassionate way, hence, avoiding self-critical and self-blame thoughts. That way, they are able to experience their senses in the present, in the moment, and exercise their mind and body towards being present and aware of the moment without being fixated in past experiences that may affect their next call or their personal lives, thus, contaminating their job performance or personal relationships. Over time, mindfulness practice can potentially be a factor that promotes police resilience and job performance in the line of duty.

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