



Stress - The Silent Cop Killer

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Make no mistake about it. Stress is deadly. The average cop is much more likely to die from stress than from bullets, car accidents, or other headline grabbers. Stress is called the silent killer because we are often not aware of its effects. Indeed, we often don't even know that we are under stress until its too late-like finding out that we have high blood pressure, heart disease, or other serious medical problems.

Here's how it might go down. Lately, you haven't been feeling quite right. Lot of stomach gas, you seem to be tired all the time, and generally just feel out of sorts. So, finally, you visit the doctors office. After an examination, you get the word: your condition is serious and it appears to be stress-related. You look stunned. You ask yourself how could this happen? After all, you're still relatively young. You're a cop. Sure, there's a lot of stress on the job, but you can handle it. Hell, you're Superman (or Superwoman). You can leap tall buildings in a single bound while carrying doughnuts in both hands!.

The Origins

Stress is sometimes called the carbon monoxide of the mind. It is odorless, colorless, and can sneak up on you without warning. So where does this stress come from? In its more dramatic and much more easily identified form, it comes from danger or the threat of danger. Being at the circus in the animal tent when Bubba, the 500 pound gorilla, breaks out of his cage is definitely one of those.

But stress overload also comes from the day-in-day-out dealing with too much pressure. Its the result of too many demands and too little time, and the frustration of not always being able to get things to come out right. Trying to be the super cop. Dealing with the troubles and woes of the public. Going nose to nose every day with the scum bags. The constant gut-grinding frustration of trying to cope with a million different tasks, each of which seems to be screaming for our immediate attention. And, that's not all. Its also the results of all those unhealthy habits we develop, including hit-and-run eating (mostly greasy junk food swilled down with too much coffee and colas!) and the attempts to wind down or numb up with too much booze after your shift is over.

Good Stress - Bad Stress

Not all stress is bad. In fact, a certain amount of stress is good because it can motivate you and stimulate you to action. Its that cautious edginess that street cops develop on the job. A state of readiness, so that they are alert and ready to respond instantly to whatever comes their way.

Think of stress as automotive fuel. You need some in your tank or you cant drive your car anywhere. That's the good kind of stress. Bad stress, on the other hand, is an overload. It is the fuel which spills out onto the driveway when your tank is overfilled. Just like a big (and growing bigger!) puddle of fuel, stress overload is explosive and represents a real danger.

Stress, like fuel, comes in a variety of kinds (leaded, regular, super, diesel, etc.) and an assortment of octane ratings. A given type with a particular octane rating may function very well in one vehicle but cause immediate and serious damage in another. Further, each of us, like different makes and models of vehicles, has an individual fuel capacity. You could pump a 100 gallons of number two diesel into some big double-clutching 18-wheeler and it wont even begin to reach its full capacity, but try that with some little bitty four-cylinder and you've got a potential disaster on your hands.

Fight Or Flight

Psychologists and other mental health practitioners have a term for the mind-body reaction to stress. Its called a fight-or-flight response and it is triggered automatically whenever you face a danger or the threat of a danger. Actually, fight or flight are only two of the four possible responses to danger. The other two are freeze and faint.

Response to a direct threat is called fear. When you worry about the possibility/probability of that threat, its called anxiety, but the mind-body response is identical. Your mind becomes alert to the danger (real or imagined), it triggers a massive dump of adrenaline into your system, this causes your lungs to start sucking in oxygen, your heart to pump like crazy to drive the oxygen-rich blood from your lungs through the body to the muscles. They, in turn, gorge themselves full of the blood and get very tense, and your whole body gets ready to either do battle with the threat or else say Feet, do your stuff! Some other things are going on at the same time, but you get the idea. When the threat of the danger is over, your emergency response mechanism shuts down and your body goes back into a normal mode to recover.

Unfortunately, when the threat is the constant struggle and stress of a life spinning out of control in response to all the demands and tribulations, you may find yourself in a more or less continuous cycle of this fight-or-flight reaction. It does to your mind and body what trying to drive down the road at full speed in first gear with the other foot on the brake pedal does to your car: its a recipe for a certain breakdown and disaster.

The Facts

Statistics, those cold and objective descriptors, paint for us some frightening pictures of the deadly effects of stress. For example, when compared to the general population, cops tend to have significantly higher rates of divorce, suicide, and alcoholism, which I submit, may be either caused or exacerbated by job-related stress. Statistically, the job also seems to contribute to the abuse of both over-the-counter and prescription drugs, to significantly higher rates of gastrointestinal disturbances, and even to certain kinds of cancer.

A 28-year longitudinal study of Buffalo, N.Y. police officers published by Drs. John Vena and John Violanti (Law and Order, August, 1986) yielded some pretty alarming statistics. Depending on the length of service, police officers in this study, when compared to the general population, had up to 300% greater risk for digestive cancer, and up to 400% greater risk for colon, lymphatic, brain, and bladder cancer! Vena and Violanti concluded that these and other equally alarming statistics may be the direct result of . . . high [job] stress, irregular sleeping and eating habits, poor heath habits (alcohol use, cigarette smoking), and lack of exercise.

PTSD and Other Lurking Killers

Both years of accumulated stress and single particularly traumatizing events can also contribute to this deadly pattern. The experiences of the Vietnam war and its aftermath have led to a sharpened definition and awareness of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which is, fortunately, both diagnosable and treatable. While the initial focus was on military personnel and the results of being exposed to the horrors of war, PTSD is no respecter of job or status. It affects military personnel, first responders, and civilians alike. PTSD occurs when an individuals ability to cope is overwhelmed. The onset is either gradual, as a result of long term exposure to too many things which keep taxing our capacities. Or, it may be triggered by a single particularly traumatic incident, which blows away our defense and coping mechanisms.

Each individuals reactions to a particular event (or a series of events) is very personal and depends upon that individuals background and experiences, and upon how close the individual can identify personally with the circumstances and/or persons involved. Witness a kid on a bike wandering out into the traffic lane and getting hit and it instantly produces a very human reaction such as anger, concern, or shock. If you have a kid of your own who closely matches the accident victim in physical appearance, or if you had something similar happen to you when you were about that age, then those feelings you experience could be expected to be significantly more intense. To repeat: the more closely you can personally identify with a circumstance and/or the person(s) involved, the greater potential it has to increase your emotional reaction and the greater its potential for triggering stress overload.

Severe stress can cripple an individuals ability to do his/her job and live a normal life. Unresolved trauma can kill just as surely as a gun. Maladaptive attempts to deal with the stress of trauma include denying your feelings,

trying to suppress any memories of the event(s), and attempting to numb yourself with alcohol or drugs. In the extreme, unresolved trauma can result in an inability to continue doing ones job, force one to change jobs, trigger emotional disability, or even provoke suicide. It also affects family members, friends, and coworkers.

Telltale Signs

The warning signs of stress overload include:

1. Irritability, being upset, angry, and short-tempered. Finding yourself over-reacting and snapping at people.
2. Sleep disturbances - either not being able to sleep well or, conversely, spending excessive time in bed hiding and avoiding contact with the real world.
3. Changes of eating patterns such as a loss of appetite or a compulsion to eat constantly.
4. Intrusive thoughts -- replaying or reliving events over and over again in your mind.
4. A feeling of guilt (I could have done more or I should have done things differently, etc.).
5. A lack of concentration or a sense of helplessness, anger (at self or others), frustration, alienation, loneliness or confusion.
6. Onset of physical maladies such as problems with the stomach, bowels, headaches, or skin disorders. Physical signs can also include cold or sweaty hands, constant muscular tension, especially in the back, neck, and shoulders, tension in the jaw or grinding your teeth, fatigue, and nervousness (feeling keyed up). Of course, we all feel some of these symptoms some of the time, but when they are intense and/or constant, that's stress, my friend.

Solutions

What, then, can be done to reduce the potential lethality of job demands, an unhealthy life style, stress and trauma? Fortunately, there are several simple and practical steps one can take. Just as you, a police officer, might put on a protective Kevlar vest to blunt the potential affect of a criminals bullet, so, too, you can learn to armor-proof yourself in an emotional sense.

First: legitimize your feelings. Accept that you may not have all the answers and that, despite your best efforts, you may not always be able to make things come out right. You are a human being with human feelings. You are not Wonder Woman or Superman. You have certain strengths and talents, but you also have some limitations and weaknesses, too. Most importantly, its OK to have them. Nobody is perfect!

Second: learn to monitor yourself and to be honest about your feelings and needs. You can BS others, but the face that looks back from the mirror knows when you are telling the truth and when you are indulging in the massive application of toro-feculence (That means spreading a lot of bull s---, just in case you were wondering!). If you notice that you are experiencing any of the stress symptoms mentioned above, especially if they are persisting for any length of time after an event or have become a more or less chronic pattern in your life, then get help. Talk to someone you trust. Seek out the services of a professional counselor or therapist. The wrong thing to do would be to deny their existence or that they are a very normal and human reaction to something which is beyond your ability to cope successfully.

Third: develop positive anti-stress habits. The following is a list of twenty-one guidelines which will help you to develop a powerful and positive defense against the effects of stress.

1. Know your strengths and accept your limitations.
2. Be introspective - take time to monitor yourself and be aware of what is going on...AND WHY.
3. Learn to laugh. Don't take life (or yourself) so seriously. Norman Cousins, the famous writer, attributes the remission of his cancer to a stack of old classic slapstick comedy movies, which he watched over and over again until, as he said, he laughed his cancer away.

4. Organize yourself by developing plans and priorities, but be flexible enough to be able to respond to changing situations - Being over-rigid can be just as stress-producing and self-destructive as having no plans or inadequate ones. Organizing makes life a lot less hectic and promotes a sense of I am in control.

5. Remind yourself that you may not be able to control those things which happen around you or the actions and words of other people, but you have 100% ability to control your reactions to them.

6. Make certain that your plans and priorities include plenty of time for you and yours, there's nothing wrong with taking that kind of time, no matter how busy your schedule is or how many demands are being made upon you. Not too long ago, I had a long heart-to-heart with a friend who is a priest. He was literally on the verge of worrying and working himself to death in an effort to attend to all the needs of his flock. When I suggested he needed to take time out for himself, he gave me a pained look and said that he just couldn't be that selfish, that people needed him so badly. (Which was true. He is a very diligent and caring person, but the demands placed upon him by both himself and others were rapidly bringing him to the point of physical and emotional collapse.) I suggested to him that if he did not practice a little selfishness on a regular basis so that he could attend to some of his own needs, he would soon be incapable of attending to anyone's! I rested my case!

7. Learn simple relaxation techniques. Knowing how to do a progressive relaxation or deep breathing or self-hypnosis can act like magic to shrug off the symptoms of physical and emotional stress.

8. A few minutes spent listening to some favorite quiet music while focusing on slow, relaxing breathing is often worth a handful of Valium and a whole lot easier on your system!

9. Practice good nutrition by eating the right kinds of foods and cutting back on the bad stuff, especially limiting those which are known to cause problems like heavy greasy junk foods wolfed down on the run.

10. Make sure your diet includes plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables and is rich in fiber and complex carbohydrates such as grains, pasta, rice, etc.

11. Limit your intake of sugar, alcohol, and caffeine. (Watch those daily stop-offs at the doughnut shack!)

12. Make sure you get enough vitamins and minerals. Anti-stress and anti-oxidants such as vitamins A, B-complex, C, D, and E are all important. Enough means adequate, not mega doses. Perhaps one of the best guides is THE VITAMIN BIBLE by Mindell. Its available in paperback and is written in a clear, simple, no-nonsense style.

13. Listen when your body talks to you. Don't ignore those signs which tell you you're pushing too hard or not taking proper care of yourself. Headaches, backaches, skin disorders, grumbles in the tummy and its nether regions are messages. Danger, Will Robinson!

14. Avoid long term or regular use of medications, including over-the-counter drugs unless you are doing so under a physicians care. Even then, the question should always be Is there something which I can do which will allow me to be able to discontinue the use of these medications? It would be poor advice to discontinue a medication for, say, an ulcer when it is flaring up and your tummy is feeling like the convention site of the B.O.A. (Blowtorch Operators of America). However, merely treating the symptoms is also ill-advised. You should make every attempt to identify what is causing the ulcer in the first place and then work towards reducing or eliminating that cause. Ulcers are frequently caused by and exacerbated by stress, so while you are taking the prescribed medication for the symptom, take a hard look at your life and find out what is causing the ulcer. Any physician will tell you that treating only the symptoms is not practicing good medicine.

15. Use relaxers such as aerobics, exercise, walking, jogging, swimming, yoga, massage, sauna, meditation, self-hypnosis, games, etc.

16. Learn to leave your job at work. This is one of the most difficult things for cops to do.

17. Develop time for family and friends. Make and maintain friendships with people who don't work with you, so that you have some outside interests and do not end up talking shop when you are trying to socialize. Sure, cops are clannish and tend to limit most of their social contacts to other cops, but enlarge the circle and find non-cop

friends. According to research, a circle of supportive friends will help you to live longer and be healthier.

18. For many, relying on your faith can be a source of solace and an anchor in a sea of uncertainty.

19. Get a hobby or two (or three!!!) I am often amazed at how much better I feel after a long day when I spend some time in my garden or just stick my nose in a good book.

20. Learn to have long honest talks with that face in the mirror and to engage some positive self talk. You can BS. a lot of people, but the face that stares back at you in the mirror knows when you're spreading the bovine excrement.

21. Learn how to say no. Cops, especially, have a hard time saying no. A lot of self-induced stress overload is simply the result of over- extending yourself.

The bottom line then, to combat stress, that deadly killer which takes more lives every year than any gun or other weapon, is to practice both preventative and remedial techniques. It begins with learning to monitor your feelings, to give yourself permission to accept them as legitimate, and to take those positive steps necessary to work them through. Finally, to understand that you can practice stress-proofing yourself by doing a few of the things mentioned above to change your life style. Prevention is always better than remediation and its especially true in combating this lethal effects of this deadly killer called stress.

An Effective Anti-Stressor: Learning To Ozone Out

One of the most potent weapons at your command in the war against stress is the power of your own mind. Using that power in a practical and positive way is often called imaging, realization, or self-hypnosis. Its powerful, easy to use, and the results are nothing short of miraculous. Its also OK for you macho-types to use, too. Consider this: its the same thing that the former Soviet Union and East-bloc athletes used for the over 40 years to help them to cream everybody else at the Olympics. Its also the same stuff used by practitioners of oriental martial arts since Confucius was a pup. Nobody ever called some Russian weight lifter or some karate champ a Whooz...not to his face...and darned sure not twice!

The process is simple. All it takes is a little time, a little concentration, and a little privacy, at least at the beginning. After you've practiced it a few times, you can (and I DO) use it even in the midst of the noise and confusion of a busy airport terminal.

Here's the recipe which I have taught to literally thousands of people including I need to be pried off the wall screamers and a whole posse of Mr. and Ms. Macho types. This same technique has helped people to control panic attacks, improve athlete performance, drop job stress into the dumpster, and give minds and bodies a fast recharge.

1. At least initially until you have practiced this a few times, try to get yourself situated in a fairly quiet place.

2. Get comfortable. Sit in a nice chair or lie down, if you wish. Turn on some nice quiet, relaxing music if you want to. (In the airport, I sometimes use a Walkperson with headphones!)

3. Take five (5) easy, deep, relaxing breaths at whatever pace seems comfortable. With each breath, give yourself a mental message: I breath in relaxation. . . and I breath out stress and tension. Let each breath come in through the nose and exit through the mouth, so that you automatically relax the jaw muscles, which often carry a lot of tension.

4. On the fifth breath, as you exhale, allow your eyes to close, and continue breathing freely and easily, at whatever pace feels comfortable, as you repeat the message that you breath in relaxation and breath out stress and tension, sending that message throughout your mind and body. It would also be good to use the eyes of your mind to mentally scan your body, searching for any signs of stress and tension. If found, focus upon that part of the body, sending it a mental message to relax, loosen up, and just let go. (Be particularly attentive to neck, shoulders, and back muscles, where so much tension is stored.)

5. Now, give yourself permission to experience someplace wonderful (Somewhere you have been before, some place you have wanted to visit, or, if you wish, use this time to invent the perfect special place. In the dead of

winter, the beaches of far off Tahiti do it for me!). Allow yourself to experience it in any way you wish: see it in vivid colors, smell the fragrances, hear the sounds, touch it, taste it (the salt in the beach air, for example), and get in touch with the emotional high you get from being there. The better your ability to fantasize, the more vivid the experience. Get a little wild if you want to! You're not breaking any laws if you only THINK it!

6. When you're ready to face the world again, just count slowly from 1 to 5, open your eyes, fill your lungs with air, and stretch. Give yourself a leisure minute or two to convert the relaxation you have achieved into a feeling of energy, confidence, and a sense of I am back in control!

How long should you stay in this la-la state before counting yourself back to full alertness? As long as you want to! Usually, 4-8 minutes in this state is sufficient to give you the same effect of a two or three hour nap, but nobody ever O.D.ed on relaxing, so you decide how long to stay in the state. Each time you do it, it'll seem easier, more automatic, and-best of all-more effective. Do it two times per day minimum, ideally three to four times. Within 10 to 14 days you will have established an automatic routine, and will then be able to do it easily without having to ask yourself what to do next.

This same technique can be employed to increase your ability to do something such as improve your golf game, give a speech, or any similar task where practice can increase performance. Minus a few bells and whistles, this is the same basic technique which I have successfully taught to athletes (professional and otherwise), sufferers of stress overload, and countless others. It worked for them. It can work for you, too.

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