

# Maintaining Control

## A Step Toward Personal Growth

**"Emotional stress, the real danger in police work, is alive and flourishing within police organizations."**

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Stress has become a household word for most law enforcement officers and their families. Daily newspapers, periodicals, and police journals provide frequent references to the topic of police stress. The unique sources of stress inherent within police organizations, such as responsibility for people, loss of control, postshooting trauma, and undercover work, generate emotional stress among individual officers and their families. Emotional stress, the real danger in police work, is alive and flourishing within police organizations.

Stress has been defined by the late Hans Selye as the wear and tear on the human body caused by living.<sup>1</sup> However, the focus of this article is not the phenomenon of stress itself with its accompanying physical, mental, emotional, chemical, and hormonal changes. Rather, this article discusses the responsibility of individual officers to cope effectively with stress in a positive manner.

### Three Stages of Coping

Successfully dealing with stress can be divided into three separate stages of individual growth, develop-

ment, and maturity. These stages are:

- 1) Stage I—Innocation and training;
- 2) Stage II—The active use of individual coping techniques; and
- 3) Stage III—The evaluation process.

Considerable time, effort, and energy have been expended on stage I. Generally speaking, officers across the country have been introduced to the concept of stress and how to keep stress within their tolerance limits, and they have, for the most part, demonstrated an eagerness to understand and use stress to their advantage. Stage I is a relatively routine, developmental learning stage, but it should not be overlooked or neglected since it represents the foundation upon which the additional stages are built.

The active use of individual coping techniques represents stage II of the developmental process. This stage prompts individual officers to use the various coping devices and techniques that were previously learned and practiced. This stage is action-oriented and requires maximum effort on the part of individual officers.

Stage II involves self-motivation and commitment. These cannot be over-emphasized. "Stress management is essentially a personal skill; to be used for and by an individual . . . Coping cannot be done by someone else; it must be internalized as a part of each individual's personal makeup."<sup>2</sup>

Based on my law enforcement experience, most police officers have demonstrated an eagerness to learn to cope positively and successfully with the stress of police work. However, at the same time, there appears to be a reluctance, or fear to use new or different coping techniques. This apprehension is normal and healthy in any new learning situation. Individual members of police organizations will respond differently to the same stressor. This is because we are dealing with individual personalities. Variables such as capabilities, flexibility, ambition, aggressiveness, and previous coping experience determine how individuals will react.<sup>3</sup>

The final stage of growth, development, and maturity is actually an evaluation process. The evaluation undertaken by individual officers involves a careful examination of the

cumulative results of stages I and II. Again, it is up to each individual officer to do a self-assessment. Compare your personal results with the plateaus of learning to provide yourself with a visual picture of how successful your individual coping techniques have been to that particular time. (See fig. 1.) Now is the time to assess whether to continue with your current program. If you determine that you are not satisfied with your progress, consider using new and additional coping techniques until you feel comfortable with your results. This might require altering your perception toward one or more areas of your lifestyle.

### Perception

Does the following statement sound familiar to your lifestyle? "I'm an old man, and I've had many troubles, most of which have never happened."<sup>4</sup>

We in the law enforcement community expend a great amount of energy worrying about negative hap-

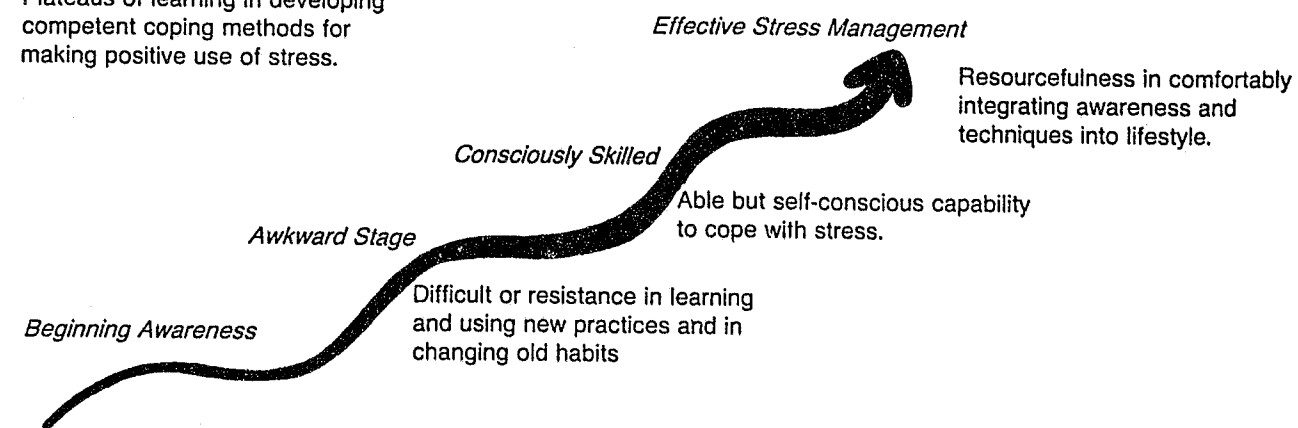
penings. How often do these events pass without ever seriously touching or affecting our lives? Unfortunately, members of police organizations often unconsciously find themselves adapting poorly to stress. Police officers are "creatures of habit," and as such, find themselves responding negatively to their work on a daily basis. By the very nature of the job, police work itself tends to breed some of this negativism. At the scene of a heinous accident or crime, for example, we find our unconscious mind attempting to cope with the severe negativism by use of the "comic defense." The use of this key ego defense mechanism, which employs humor to relieve the tension, is often an alternative to getting sick, crying, or perhaps running away. We have little or no control over negative events that we might be exposed to daily, weekly, or monthly in law enforcement. However, we do have control of ourselves. "By and large most events are neutral. You give them meaning. You make them



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Figure 1

Plateaus of learning in developing competent coping methods for making positive use of stress.



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what they seem. Your expectations, knowledge, and anticipations of a situation will have a critical bearing on the event's impact."<sup>5</sup>

This can be summed up by emphasizing that the majority of the stress that we, as members of the law enforcement subculture, suffer from is self-induced. We can often reduce our stress level by simply thinking positively and altering our perception or the manner in which we comprehend things. Work hard at developing an overall positive and healthy outlook on life. "Stress is the product of an entire lifestyle, whether personal or organizational. It is not the product of an occasional crisis."<sup>6</sup> Get into the habit of beginning each day with a positive attitude. Whenever you lose that positive charge, immediately make a conscious effort to reverse your thought patterns. Mrs. Rose Kennedy aptly summed up what has been said about perception during a recent television interview on her birthday when she said, "Birds sing after a storm, why can't we?"

#### Lack of Control

Police officers are continually called upon to confront situations over which they exercise little or no control. "Lack of control is a major cause of stress on the job."<sup>7</sup> Typical examples might involve an attempted suicide or hostage case. Police officers are called upon daily to make split-second, life-or-death decisions. How can you maintain a feeling of control when you realize that you will be dealing with variables such as personality?

The following statement might provide guidance when you are having difficulty thinking positively and maintaining control of a situation, at least in your mind:

"I feel determined to strive to use

whatever power I have to change the unpleasant stresses of life that I can change, to dislike but realistically accept those that I cannot change and to have the wisdom to know the difference between the two."<sup>8</sup>

This might appear to be the ideal, but it can be a powerful tool to assist officers in maintaining control through the use of a positive attitude. Another way of expressing the same type of optimism might be, "Life is not so bad, celebrate what you have." We tend to fall prey easily to the "why me?" syndrome. Accentuating the positive is one of the best and healthiest coping techniques available to

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police officers.

#### The Stress Management Puzzle

Members of police organizations will find that successfully coping with stress can be as simple as putting the pieces of a puzzle together. The good news is that it is not a 1,000-piece puzzle. The stress management puzzle consists of only five pieces. (See fig. 2.) Successful stress management demands a balance involving the five parts of the puzzle. A lost, damaged, overused, or underused piece to the puzzle will detract from its effectiveness. Examine the five pieces of the stress management puzzle, while keeping in mind the fact that no one piece of the puzzle is im-

portant by itself. The puzzle only has meaning when all five pieces are used equally.

Members of police organizations should be comfortable and confident within both their work and social environments. This permits individual officers to keep stress within their own particular tolerance limits, thereby maximizing performance. Attitudinal changes, comic defense, and perception, although they can never be over-emphasized, have already been discussed. These can provide officers with the necessary distraction and support when severe stress exists in the work, social, or family environments. Members of police organizations must learn to adapt as quickly and as positively as possible to stressful situations. Prolonged, unrelieved periods of stress will eventually lead to stress contagion, and in time, burnout among police organizations.

Members of police organizations will be likely to experience some difficulty when they examine the second piece of the stress management puzzle. The second piece of the puzzle is concerned with emotions, which can be described as internal feelings. This is where a problem arises for many police officers. Police organizations encourage officers to camouflage their true emotions and replace them with the "macho image," which is readily accepted. The emotion that should have been vented or expressed is suppressed by officers and essentially buried alive, where it begins to eat away at the officer from the inside.

We need to seek alternative methods which encourage the venting of emotions in a positive manner. Understanding and keeping in touch with your emotions can prevent you from sinking into a depression. Do not hesi-

tate, when you feel your emotions heighten, to take some overt action to defuse or debrief yourself. This might involve face-to-face discussions with a partner, spouse, or anyone with whom you can feel comfortable from the aspect of debriefing, especially one who will not be judgmental of your emotions.

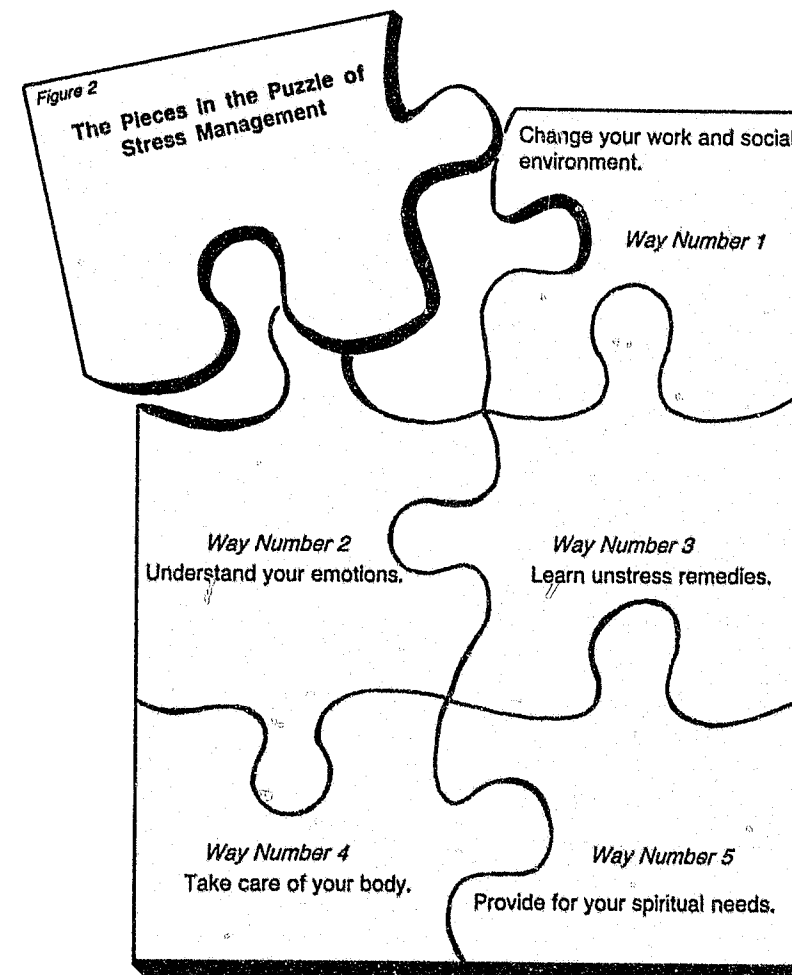
The third piece of the puzzle and probably the key to an easy and suc-

cessful solution lies within the learning and application of "unstress remedies." "Unstress is a new word for most people and suggests relaxation, peace, and well-being."<sup>9</sup> All too often we neglect ourselves and put all of our effort and energy into the other pieces of the puzzle. The following list contains a number of "unstress remedies," as well as other healthy means, by which we can more appropriately

cope with stress:

- 1) Eat three meals a day, including breakfast;
- 2) Avoid sugar, salt, animal fats, and processed white flour;
- 3) Pursue a regular program of physical activity and/or other leisure pursuits;
- 4) Nurture and maintain friendships;
- 5) Get enough sleep and rest;
- 6) Practice abdominal breathing and relaxation;
- 7) Schedule time and activities alone and with others to maintain a well-rounded lifestyle of living and working;
- 8) Stop smoking;
- 9) Limit alcohol and caffeine intake;
- 10) Identify and accept emotional needs;
- 11) Pace yourself to allow for an even flow of demands;
- 12) Recognize the early behavior or physical signs of stress and take action against the stressor;
- 13) Allocate your time and energy to allow for periods of rest and stimulation; and
- 14) Take appropriate supplement, if needed, for proper nutrition.<sup>10</sup>

The fourth piece of the stress management puzzle, "take care of your body," is often taken for granted. We tend to ignore the human body's early warning system when it is activated. We almost begin to think of ourselves in terms of being indestructible which is certainly not the case. Complex machinery in our society is usually equipped with some type of a visual or audio early warning system. When the alarm is activated, we immediately stop the machinery until we can determine the nature of the problem. However, when that intricate piece of machinery called the



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human body activates its early warning system, we tend to either ignore the warning or take it very lightly.

Members of police organizations tend to sideswipe and mask persistent stressors or symptoms, using alcohol, tobacco, or drugs. "Alcohol and drugs can only temporize; they do not solve the stress problem."<sup>11</sup> The better our physical health at the onset of stress, the better we will be able to resist the physical and psychological stressors to which we are exposed. Healthy bodies breed healthy minds and vice versa.<sup>12</sup>

The following six signs seem to do the best job of telegraphing a message that the body's early warning system has been activated and some type of corrective action should be initiated:

- 1) Changes of personality;
- 2) Isolation from support groups;
- 3) Unusual sleep patterns;
- 4) Continued somatic complaints (headache, backache, stomachache);
- 5) Excessive use of self-medication (alcohol and/or drugs); and
- 6) Nothing seems pleasurable, such as eating, hobbies, sex, etc. (anhedonia).

The final piece to the stress management puzzle considers our spiritual needs. Our spiritual beliefs can provide reassurance and boost our confidence and morale, especially during extremely stressful times. Examine the role of religion, prayer, and meditation in your current lifestyle to determine if you are maintaining a balance in the stress management puzzle. For some, spiritual needs only emerge in times of crises, but still others believe that self-meditation brings them closer to a Supreme Being on a daily basis, enabling them to cope with life's stressors. Perhaps focusing on your

inner self rather than the surface events will provide some reassurance and satisfaction. Responsibility becomes the issue. We must learn to accept responsibility for our own actions and well-being.

#### Conclusion

The holistic approach provides members of police organizations with an excellent tool with which to build life's foundation. Balance is the key to successfully coping with stress. What you do in any one part of the five-piece stress management puzzle should enhance and complement the remaining parts. Overemphasis on health, exercise, diet, spiritual, or emotional needs will throw us into periods of disequilibrium. The running, health, or religious fanatic will in all probability not cope well with stress since he is concentrating almost totally on only a small segment of the puzzle.

One word of caution for members of police organizations. We are coping with stress at this very moment on an individual basis; however, our stress responses are not always appropriate. Take the typical stressful situations at work or home. Think about how you typically cope with these situations. Perhaps you start smoking, overeating, projecting blame, biting your nails, or drinking to excess. This is counterproductive behavior. We need to engage in "unstress activities" that are productive. Stressful events disturb our equilibrium or balance. Exercise, a productive "unstress" activity, can help us to restore equilibrium to our bodies. "Unstress activities," such as excessive drinking, smoking, or overeating, might temporarily postpone or mask the symptoms of the stressor, but they do nothing to restore our bodies to their original state. In fact, such activities often knock the

equilibrium scale further out of balance. Counterproductive behavior does not help us put any of the five pieces of the stress management puzzle together so that they will stay together. We must make a commitment to develop an action plan leading to positive, productive coping techniques. "Be it diet, exercise, creativity, work, study, health care, or whatever, we are far more productive and effective if we maintain a regular, ongoing discipline than if we develop off-and-on occasional habits . . . constant care is better than crash programs."<sup>13</sup>

Members of police organizations need not accept stress with a helpless feeling. We should not look upon stress as all bad or as an enemy, but rather as a challenge. We can take charge and harness the energy of stress to improve our own physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being as members of the police subculture.

FBI

#### Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Hans Selye, *The Stress of Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1978), p. 1.
- <sup>2</sup> E.M. Gherman, *Stress and the Bottom Line—A Guide to Personal Well-Being and Corporate Health* (New York: American Management Associations, 1981), p. 13.
- <sup>3</sup> Wayne C. Richard and Ronald D. Fell, "Health Factors in Police Job Stress," *Job Stress and the Police Officer: Identifying Stress Reduction Techniques*, edited by W.H. Kroes and J.J. Hurrell (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1975), p. 74.
- <sup>4</sup> Wayne W. Dyer, *Pulling Your Own Strings* (New York: Hearst Corporation, 1979), p. 33.
- <sup>5</sup> *Supra* note 2, p. 217.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- <sup>7</sup> Keith W. Sahnert, *Stress/Unstress—How You Can Control Stress at Home and on the Job* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), p. 42.
- <sup>8</sup> James P. Spradley and Robert L. Veninga, *The Work Stress Connection—How to Cope with Job Burnout* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), p. 88.
- <sup>9</sup> *Supra* note 7, p. 14.
- <sup>10</sup> *Supra* note 2, p. 252.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.
- <sup>12</sup> Jere E. Yates, *Managing Stress—A Business Person's Guide* (New York: American Management Associations, 1979), p. 99.
- <sup>13</sup> *Supra* note 7, pp. 17-18.

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