STRESS AND THE POLICE OFFICER

Second Edition

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By

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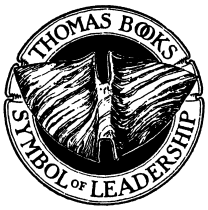

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To
Robert J. Louden
and
Stephen R. Band
Two of the finest cops I've ever known.

PREFACE

The scientific–and popular–literature on stress and stress management has increased exponentially since the first edition of *Stress and the Police Officer* (1983). Stress has settled in as a fad. Some of the work has been of highest quality; alas, some has not. There have been and continue to be exaggerated claims of extraordinarily high levels of stress and stress-related problems, accompanied by "instant fixes." In this edition, I have tried to evaluate these claims for their scientific merit. I acknowledge, however, that scientific knowledge is ever-changing. For this reason, I have included an appendix for those readers who are not scientifically trained, to help them begin to evaluate the claims of various authors.

Policing also has changed in these years. We cannot yet know the full impact of the incidents of September 11, 2001, on police work. However, there have been changes in the demographics of many departments, with more women and ethnic minority group members coming into the field.

I am distressed by my perception that the research on police stress has not kept pace with the research on occupational stress in general. Much remains to be done. I have tried to point out some of the areas where assertions do not match evidence.

In the first edition of this book, I included some specific strategies for stress management. As there are now some excellent resources that are generally available (and listed in Appendix B), I have minimized this kind of content.

I have worked with law enforcement officers for over 30 years, and have learned much from them. Certainly, my life has been changed by these interactions.

Good policing is not impossible. In my years of association with officers, I have seen many who do their jobs with skill and understanding.

In addition, the reactions that have been associated with stressors are not inevitable. Many officers retire in good physical and emotional health and look back on their careers with pleasure.

Yet the reactions associated with stressors are common enough and potentially deleterious enough to personal and organizational well-being that they deserve consideration. I have tried to highlight some of the common stress reactions and the solutions that are most widely accepted.

In a situation where stressors have led to maladaptive behavior on the part of individuals or organizations, change is called for. Change is not easy nor can anyone think that one change, however major, will bring everlasting happiness. Change must be constant, as social conditions in the world around us vary. If one can accept this inevitability and see it as a challenge rather than a threat, life will be easier.

Hans Selye has said that the worst of all modern stressors is purposelessness. Despite the setbacks, every officer can remember times when he or she made a difference in people's lives, giving them the aid they needed to cope with a chaotic world.

At their best, the police represent a force for the order necessary for society to function. It is not an easy job, but it is one that is worth doing well. This is the challenge that I hope will sustain officers and help them to be, as Niederhoffer (1967) put it, "tolerant observers of the human comedy," and perhaps even dedicated and successful agents for change.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is dedicated to Bob Louden and Steve Band. I have known both of them and followed their careers for more than 25 years. Their dedication, professionalism, and knowledge have been an inspiration to me. Everyone should have friends and colleagues like Bob and Steve.

Throughout this book, I speak of the importance of social support. I also mention the value of giving thanks and praise where it is due. I would now like to practice what I preach and thank some of those people whose support and contributions made my work possible.

First, I want to thank those police officers (and former officers) who contributed to my knowledge of stress in policing and showed me that it is possible to do this difficult job well. These have included Frank Schafer, David Harman, Roger Terry, Lenny DePoe, John Genz, James D. Sewell, Gene Chiosi, Paul Cell, Herbert Lloyd, and John Cross. I also must extend my gratitude to many members of the Montclair Township and Montclair State University Police Departments, as well as other agencies and individuals who have shared their knowledge with me.

I spent the month of June, 2001, as a Visiting Faculty Fellow with the Behavioral Sciences Unit at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia. It was there that I did much of the research for this volume. Members of that unit were unfailingly kind and helpful. Special thanks to Sandra Coupe, Samuel Feemster, Anna Grymes, Joseph Harpold, Faye Koerner, Harry Kern, John Lanata, Cynthia Laskiewicz, Sharon Smith, and Nancy Ward. Also John Wills.

In the spring semester of 2002 (in the aftermath of September 11, 2001), I was privileged to teach stress management to officers from the New York City Police at John Jay College in New York City. These students provided a wealth of insights and personal experiences; they

also gave me an opportunity to fine-tune some of the concepts and strategies I have presented. Special thanks to Pat O'Hara who made that experience possible.

Librarians are the unsung heros of any academic book. At the FBI Academy Library, Jean Caddy, Jane Garrison, and Pat Singstock proved invaluable. Many of the references to the popular literature I have used came from the Hasbrouck Heights, New Jersey, Public Library. I'm sure I tried the patience of Michele Maiullo and members of her staff: Mimi Hui, Carolyn Lee Kravatsky, Judy Mascis, and Josephine Zangl, but they were unfailingly patient and cheerful as they logged me on to the computer almost daily and answered my many questions.

Members of my civilian support network have included Saundra Collins, Joseph J. Hurrell, Jr., Rita Schafer, Roland Siiter, Lisa Staszak, Nick Humez, Cynthia Radnitz, JoAnn Jandoli, and Verna Louden. I always have been able to call on them for professional and personal support. Diane Delaney, who also is a special friend, kindly read and commented on the section on nutrition.

I must acknowledge here my debt to two academic mentors, now deceased. Barbara Dohrenwend was a superb researcher and pioneer in the stress field. She also was a person of great integrity, courage, and an extraordinary commitment to ethics, even if she had to take unpopular positions. Her untimely death was a tremendous loss to all of us who knew and worked with her. She is the model to which I aspire.

My second acknowledgement in the academic realm is to the late Robert Buckhout. Bob was one of the first (modern) researchers to work in the field of the eyewitness. His work was seminal, encouraging others to do research in the area.

Very special thanks go to (very much alive) Fred Tanis, my surrogate brother. Finally, thanks to Donald Pitches, who has been a shining presence in my life and the shelter of a mighty rock within a–sometimes–weary land. Donald has helped me keep my life and the world in perspective. We laugh together a lot–and occasionally cry a bit. Donald twinkles with a spirit's light.

CONTENTS

STRESS AND THE POLICE OFFICER

Chapter 1

THE NATURE OF STRESS

INTRODUCTION

Everyone acknowledges that life today can be stressful; in this, researchers (see Lehrer & Richardson, 1993), the popular media, and the average person agree. So, too, everyone agrees that stress can be harmful; we find research linking stress with a wide variety of physical and emotional ills (Sapolsky, 1994; Lehrer & Richardson, 1993; Holmes & Masuda, 1974). It also has been implicated in a multiplicity of organizational problems (Murphy et al., 1995; Ayers, 1990).

Despite more than 50 years of research and more than 25 years of intense interest in the popular media, there is a striking paucity of agreement about the specific nature of stress, its effects on physical and emotional well-being, the severity or length of time necessary for a stressful event, or combination of stressful events, to lead to damage. Nor is there agreement on the characteristics of individual biology or personality that may mediate the effects of potentially stressful events. Controversy also surrounds the part played by work situations, family and peer support, cultural expectations, and the like. Many interventions to reduce the impact of events thought to be stressful have been proposed, but none has received unequivocal support (Lehrer & Richardson, 1993). There even is controversy over the meaning of the term itself.

Because stress is a complex phenomenon, it requires complex research methodology for its study. Debate over appropriate approaches rages in the professional literature (Brown & Campbell, 1994; Lehrer & Richardson, 1993; Coyne & Lazarus, 1979; Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974). Much of the more elegant

research has been done in laboratories, under artificial conditions and with limited time spans, and may have little applicability to real-life situations.

Any statements about stress and its effects, then, must be made with some caution. Given the current state of knowledge, no absolute, categorical statements are appropriate. This is especially crucial to remember in light of the numerous strategies found with great regularity in newspapers and magazines, and in expensive "seminars" that *guarantee* instant solutions for reducing both the stress of everyday life and that which comes from great trauma.[1] This does not mean, however, that it is impossible to make a beginning. As in most areas of knowledge, the emphasis is on making educated guesses and on improving percentages.

There is another reason for undertaking programs aimed at reducing the potential negative effects of stress before all the returns are in. Virtually all the techniques that have been recommended work to improve the quality of life in other areas as well. At least, if they are not effective, they are benign. Thus, appropriate recognition for good work on the job is thought both to increase efficiency and to decrease the problems typically associated with stress. Exercise and weight control programs improve general physical condition, strengthen the heart and lungs, decrease the risk of bone loss, and enhance feelings of well-being, while making it easier for the individual to deal with the physiological strain put on the body by stressful event.

In stress management, as in almost every other area of human functioning, there is no foolproof formula for success. As we will see, individuals differ markedly in the events they define as stressful, in the ways they react to pressure, and in the specific techniques for dealing with stressful events that will be most successful (Sapolsky, 1994; Lehrer & Woolfolk, 1993). Despite this, it is possible to offer some suggestions that work for many people. It is up to each individual and organization to decide how to use this information.

This chapter will present an overview of the research on the nature of stress. Then I will summarize the most prevalent theories about the

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1. We have seen this in the aftermath of the tragedy of September 11, 2001. Virtually every newspaper and periodical I have read had a list of ways to reduce the impact of those events. Some of them are accurate, as far as they go, but they do not give sufficient guidance to be practical. Further, they can be dangerous. They can lead a person who tries to follow the suggestions and does not get instant relief to blame him or herself: "I must be doing something wrong."

nature of those events (called "pressures" or "stressors") that are believed to be involved in the stress process.

DEFINITION

A first area of disagreement in stress research is over how the term "stress" should be used (Brown & Campbell, 1994; Lehrer & Richardson, 1993; Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974; van Dijkhuizen, 1980).[2] Some researchers use it to mean the event or situation outside the person, such as a catastrophic event or accident, extremes of temperature, crowding, physical isolation, loud noise, shift work, a death in the family, or a reprimand from a superior. Others use it for the inner state of the individual, a state that can seldom be measured directly, but can be inferred from behavior, such as clenched teeth or expressions of distress, or from some other measurable state, such as the level of certain chemicals in the blood.[3] Anxiety, anger, joy, frustration, and sadness fit into this category. Indeed, Cofer and Appley (1964, p. 441) point out rather irritably that "it [stress] has all but preempted a field previously shared by a number of other concepts," including frustration, conflict and anxiety. They and others seem to feel that such a broad scope so dilutes the meaning of the term as to make it almost meaningless, and certainly makes it difficult to study with any scientific rigor. Especially, it makes comparisons across studies difficult if not impossible.

A third common use of the term "stress" refers to an observable response to an external or internal stimulus or situation, both physiological responses, such as sweating palms, pounding heart, increased adrenaline flow, and more behavioral ones such as yelling and cursing or other aggressive responses, crying, the regression that involves behaving in more child-like ways, and the like. On a longer-term basis, measures are taken of physical conditions such as absenteeism, heart attacks, ulcers or a variety of other ailments, or emotional and interpersonal problems such as depression, anxiety, divorce, domestic abuse, early retirement, or number of incidents of command discipline.

2. As the reader may notice, this debate has been ongoing for a number of years.
3. The ability to measure biological states which are believed to be correlated with external events has increased dramatically in recent years. For a very readable review of the effects of external events on levels of hormones in humans and animals, see Sapolsky (1994).

To attempt to clear up some of this confusion, some researchers suggest using the terms "stressors," or "stressful events," for the stimulus: the event or events that serve as the trigger, and "strain" or "stress response" for the response. Those factors that influence whether an external event will serve as a stressor and the specific stress response are often refereed to as mediators or moderator variables.

Psychologist Richard Lazarus (1966) points out that, although both the environmental stimulus and the reacting individual are vital elements, it is the nature of the interaction, the relationship between the two, that is crucial. He defines stress as "a very broad class of problems differentiated from other problem areas because it deals with any demands which tax the system, . . . and the response of that system." To this, I would add any intervening processes: the environment, including the social situation, a variety of individual variables such as personality, genetics, background, culture, and the like. We have, then, a model that begins with events, filtered through the unique make-up and experiences of the individual, and expressed in a variety of outcomes, both positive and negative. To this, we must add the effects of organizations.

In the interest of clarity, I will use the terms "stressor," "stressful events," and "pressures," to refer to the stimulus, or presumed cause, the terms "stress reaction" or "stress response" for the behavior or physical changes that occur, and the general term "stress" for the entire process.

RESEARCH ON STRESS[4]

The vast research literature on stress and stress management has comprised a number of approaches. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, and, certainly, none can give comprehensive answers to the many questions that have arisen in the area.

Some general problems occur with all types of research. We need to look at the group or population on which the research was conducted. Brown and Campbell (199) make the point that much of the work on

4. A brief description of the methods most commonly used to study stress may be found in Appendix A. Behavioral scientists, of course, will be aware of the caveats described. This section on methodology is primarily for those without training in the social sciences. It is, necessarily, a very brief overview.

police stress has been conducted using American samples and ask whether these results can be generalized to police in other countries or cultures. Further, much of the research has been done on officers in large, urban departments (e.g., Kroes & Gould, 1982; Stratton, 1978; Reiser, 1974), although the vast majority of departments are small. Sewell (1981) developed his scale of stressful events in policing using officers attending the FBI's National Academy and officers from a county in Virginia, hardly a representative group. Comparisons across occupations, such as police and physicians, are confounded by other variables, often related to social class, including diet, health care, and smoking.

Not only is there tremendous variability among departments, there are wide ranges among individuals in most of the measures studied. (However, it should be noted that police populations probably have less variability than the general public.)

Over- or underpredicting is not uncommon. Despite data that say that policing is not uniquely stressful or dangerous (Brown & Campbell, 1994; Terry, 1981), the myth persists and runs the risk of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The number of subjects in most studies tends to be relatively small. These subjects seldom are chosen randomly, with everyone having an equal chance of being chosen. Much more commonly, researchers will take anyone who is willing to participate.

Especially critical is the problem of criteria. For example, when deciding on a selection procedure for new officers, what standards are important? Where should those data be obtained? Inwald (1986) has used the factors deemed important by police chiefs; I used a variety of "stakeholders:" officers, supervisors, township citizens, merchants, even criminals (Ellison, 1986). Some psychological tests are specifically normed on police (Hiatt, 1986; Inwald, 1986; Neal, 1986, Shaw, 1986). In other cases, the examiner just grabs any test off the shelf, sometimes using tests, such as the House-Tree-Person, that have not been determined to predict anything (Anastasi & Urbina, 1997). Even if they use a test such as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, which has been studied extensively in police selection (see Hiatt, 1986; Neal, 1986; Shaw, 1986), they may ignore these data and make decisions based on the belief that the profile that fits a good teacher or accountant will also be appropriate for police, an assumption which research disputes (Hiatt, 1986; Neal, 1986). The work that

has been done may use grades from the police academy as the measure of success (see Ellison, 1986). This may not correlate with supervisors' ratings or other criteria of success.

With these warnings in mind, we can begin to examine the pressures that have received the most attention. These include individual factors, especially personality factors, the impact of stressful life events, burnout, organizational factors, sociocultural factors and events believed to be universally stressful.

PRESSURES

Individual Personality Factors

"He's strong; he can take anything." "He goes to pieces over the least little problem." Comments of this sort spotlight the common belief that there are large individual differences in the way people handle pressure. Many people seem to believe that individual personality factors are the *only* variables worthy of consideration in understanding stress reactions, a belief that undergirds many of the strategies suggested for stress reduction.

Most social scientists who study stress disagree. Nevertheless, much time and energy has been spent on research into traits, personality types, and ways of thinking that seem to influence the way individuals deal with conflict, frustration, and change in general.

The best known of the theories linking personality style to stress reactions, and then to disease, has been Friedman and Rosenman's (1974) work on the link between heart disease and a behavior pattern that they have called "Type A." Type A people are aggressive, impatient, easily provoked into becoming hostile, overcommitted to work, and talk loudly and rapidly. They often are insensitive and intolerant of others. They have much greater physiological reactions–a stronger or more frequent fight or flight response–than people with an easy-going personality, one which Friedman and Rosenman called "Type B." The research of these authors found that Type A people were twice as likely to develop coronary heart disease. (All the subjects in this initial research were men.)

More recent research has found that the situation is not so simple. Once they do have a heart attack, Type A's are more likely to survive (Ragland & Brand, 1988). Tearing apart the various aspects of the orig-