

## Stress Management in the Police Work

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**Abstract:** According to the World Health Organization estimates, stress is one of the risk factors most frequently affecting human health, along with obesity, alcoholism, drugs and smoking, and the suicide due to work-related stress will be the main cause of death in 2025 (Turc, 2006). Given this, and the that the profession of police officer has been ranked in the top ten most stressful jobs the U.S. (by The American Institute of Stress) and categorized as one of the most stressful occupations in the world (by Michael Pittaro, executive director of The Council on Alcohol and Drug Abuse in 2008, in a study on occupational stress in police)<sup>1</sup>, both because of the nature of police work, and because of the multiple influences associated with the work environment, this article aims to briefly review the issue of stress in the field of police work, covering many aspects of it, such as sources of stress, forms of stress and its implications, the prevention factors, strategies to reduce stress and combat its negative effects, so that workers in this field be able to recognize it when stress is present and what it was caused by, and be able to manage it effectively.

**Keywords:** source of stress in police work; form of stress; prevention factors; reduce stress

### 1. Introduction

The institutions in the field of law and public safety have promoted an image of a resistant, tough, overqualified employee, and in the public opinion, the police officer is often perceived as a powerful official, because they are armed. But, unfortunately, the uniform and the gun of the individual invested in the role of the police officer do not act as armor against stress, protecting them from professional stress. It is therefore very important to know the impact of environmental stress on the mental and emotional health of the police officer, the way the level of stress can be optimized, and the methods to prevent and fight the negative consequences of stress that the individual may use. The more so as, in addition to the potential effects of stress on the health and wellbeing of individuals, stress also involves an

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economic and social impact, as it can reduce the individual performance and productivity at work and thus affect the evolution of the organization as a whole.

Stress is neither a disease nor an abstract concept but a biological reality, which has been studied by researchers for decades, which is ubiquitous in our daily lives, in everything we do and regardless of the field in which we work, and which was considered "the calamity of our age". To fight the harmful effects of this phenomenon on contemporary society, a number of measures have been taken, including: the reduction of working time in favor of leisure and private life, the decreased complexity of tasks by using more advanced technologies in the activity, etc. However, the impact of work related stress remains high, regardless of the socio-professional category considered: performers, managers, employees, and its consequences are important both for the employees (from fatigue, chronic sleep disorders, digestive problems, anxiety, depression, anger, to cardiovascular disease and suicide) and for the institutions (affecting the productivity and competitiveness of the organization and increasing employee health insurance costs). Due to high costs caused by the effects of stress on employee performance, organizations are increasingly interested to study, to know and to prevent this phenomenon.

Institutions of law, order and public safety have a critical role in all countries, especially in socially and economically difficult times they go through. As with other institutions there have been major changes here as well, (in the role, organization, responsibility and activity, continuous increase in crime rates: tax evasion, smuggling, drug trafficking and human trafficking, blackmail, murder, theft, etc.). All of these require increased attention to the activity, but especially the staff of these institutions.

Frequent social and economic changes, often unexpected and profound, in today's society, but also the specific working environment of the Romanian Police generate new types of stressful situations (unpredictable and rapid change, uncertainty, risk, permanent increase in labor competitiveness, globalization, terrorism, unemployment, living standards oscillations), which challenge the bodies of the workers in the field, in terms of adaptation, continuously and at a faster rate than in the case of other socio-professional categories.

## **2. The Concept of Stress**

According to Webster's Encyclopedia Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, etymologically, the word "stress" comes from the abbreviation of the English word "distress", the word "estrece" in old French, meaning "coercion, suffering", derived in turn from the Latin "strictus" past participle of "string", meaning "to strain, to struggle".

A pioneer of the concept of stress is considered to be Canadian researcher Hans Selye, who, since 1926, conducted studies on the influence of stress on the individual's capacity to adapt to various conditions and diseases. Thus, he noted that patients suffering from minor medical conditions experienced rather similar symptoms as subjects exposed to stress. Selye began to study, in the laboratory, using rats, the effect of exposure to physical stress, and with the interpretation of clinical and pathological observations, he developed the concept of "general adaptation syndrome" which described the body's effort to respond to environmental challenges. Starting from the idea that there is no disease that is caused solely by stress, but too much stress can lead to depletion of the body's means of defense, Hans Selye introduced the concept of "adjustment disorder" and the term stress; the researcher defined stress as "a general non-specific reaction of the organism to the action of external factors - stress agents – of a various nature (physical, chemical, biological and psychological)" (Grigoroiu, 2006, p. 31) and he believed that stress is closely related to the adaptation process.

Later in the 50s, scientist Hans Selye introduced the concept of stress proper in medicine itself, which was later imported in psychiatry and psychology. Today, this term is used in the common language as a concept of interdisciplinary value, which means all the reactions of the organism to adapt to the physical and psychosocial environment.

### **3. Sources of Stress in Police Work**

Stress can be caused by a multitude of **stressors**. They are endogenous or exogenous mental exciters, with a major affective echo - positive or negative - or they may be generated by cognitive (thought, attention, etc.) or volitional overload, and it is necessary to know them, in order to manage the effects of stress.

As it is known, all trades are a source of stress for each individual to deal with using their own means, but there are some activities considered high-risk of dysfunctional stress jobs. One of these is being a policeman, that Hans Selye stated it is one of the most hazardous occupations, exceeding even the stress of those involved in air traffic (Mihalcea, 2006, p. 77). The same opinion was shared by many other authors (Kroes, Margolis, Hurrell, 1974, Reiser, 1976, Terry, 1981; Loo, 1984, Dantzer, 1987; Gersons, 1989) which found that policemen show physical symptoms and problems caused by psychological stress more often than workers in other professions (Anshel, 2000) or that the working environment of police has pathological features that predispose to the emergence of mental problems (Sheptycki, 2004) (Mihalcea, 2006, p. 77). Other researchers have supported the idea that the nature of activities in the military or quasi-military institutions, or the functioning in such an institution requires the individual to

sacrifice themselves for the good of society and in which the individual is less important, as the "group" is the one that prevails. This can cause undesirable and very stressful situations, with disruptive effects on the mental health of the staff (Kelly, Sean 2004) (Mihalcea, 2006, p. 77).

Difficulties encountered by police in solving workplace problems are due to several interrelated factors, which are individual, social, cultural and organizational.

In most literature, the stressors for police officers are grouped in four categories, namely:

- *stressors arising from institution organization itself*: specific policies and procedures of the institution; autocratic management; limited opportunity for advancement; fear generated by the internal control department; lack of staff; inadequate logistics equipment;
- *aspects of police officers' personal life*: personal factors; emotions frequently generated by the police work; exhaustion;
- *"pressure" exerted by the actual police work*: team work; periods of inactivity and boredom; trauma; stress factors that come from working with the public: public attitudes about police work and police officers; frequent exposure of police workers to verbal or physical attacks; being a target of violence; sporadic exposure to intentional or accidental violence results
- *stress factors coming from the judiciary*: difficulty of integrating appearances before the courts in the working program; slowness of the judicial process.

In the following, we list the most common and "harmful" sources of stress identified by scientific research conducted in the police environment, without this list being exhaustive:

According to popular perception, the police work stressor with the highest frequency is **the danger involved** in this activity, a factor which was approached by most authors who have studied this aspect.

**Human suffering.** Prolonged exposure to inequities and brutality has a major impact on the individual, no matter how well adapted they are. Emotional constraint is an adaptive mechanism that requires a huge energy consumption. This excessive energy consumption can cause fatigue of the policeman outside office hours, alleviating their desire to participate in social life and family life, and even inducing a state of mental exhaustion at the workplace or with the family.

**The level of danger.** The profession of policeman is characterized by the abundance of dangerous elements, such as involvement in crimes or violence,

casualty, accidents, use of arms, affecting police officers, both directly and indirectly (family life and police environment).

**Emotional reactions of the police.** For example, fear, as a source of stress related to police work is a topic too little addressed by the police on the grounds that emotion could be interpreted as a sign of unnecessary weakness and sensitivity. This attitude of silence can be seen with all the emotions, except for anger and desire to compete, which is itself supported by the police environment (Payette, 1985, pp. 140-144).

**Role conflict.** In some cases, such as arresting an offender who committed an offense punishable by law and which is, at the same time against human values and norms, the police should not get emotionally involved, but they should act with due regard to their rights in order not to risk being accused of incompetence or abuse.

**Speed of action in contingency.** In some particular situations, the policeman is surprised and they must react in seconds. Later, the legality of the actions taken during this event is evaluated for several months, and the analysis ignores the fact that time was limited at the moment. In such circumstances, there may appear "sudden stress" (hard to control) or it can easily and quickly switch from minor to major stress, more difficult to manage, which can unbalance the policeman, both physically and mentally. In other words, policemen can suddenly go from a state of calmness to a state of pressure and strain. Although for most professional groups stress is considered a normal psychological process of accumulation, which may be reduced or adjusted, before the "out of control" moment, this is not supported by studies in the police environment. This is because in their work, the policemen must react quickly to new situations they face (as opposed to other types of workers that are warned in advance) and not in a precautionary manner (Oligny, 2010).

**Feedback.** Given that police work is fragmented and a policeman rarely can follow a case from beginning to end, feedback does not exist or is minimal. The absence of a response may lead to a policeman's appreciation that the police are unable to fix the problems people face daily and hence, a self-image dominated by a sense of worthlessness can be present.

**Uneven planning of work.** Modifying the work schedule due to unplanned situations affects the daily life of the policemen.

**Variable working hours.** Policemen must do their duty of office for 24 hours/day, 7 days/week, for which they work in shifts, like other groups of workers. Instability of working hours has a disruptive effect on the physical, mental and social health of the policemen, and the quality of their family life.

**Proximity of marginal environment.** Vicinity to a marginal environment (people living on the edge of society) may lead some policemen to a state of cynicism responsible for a sort of "depersonalization".

**Negative consequences (physically and mentally) of police work.** Interacting with common criminals may lead policemen to a distortion of their views on human beings and a most critical and cynical view of society. Also, a lack of trust in people can have repercussions on family and personal relations. The impact of the profession on family life can be seen in the way the policemen raise their children, as they tend to be more cautious and more severe in terms of discipline. Most of the times, by being imposed stricter rules, policemen's children are prone to depressive personality problems, and teens tend to rebel against the parent who should rule.

**Cumulative stress.** Repetition in time of stressful events results in the appearance and manifestation of cumulative stress on police officers (accumulated in time, since the time of their employment), potentially destructive, both to the physical and the psychical life.

**Inadequate and insufficient facilities.** Supplying the police with equipment and technical means of a lower quality and in poor quantities compared with what the criminals are using is an obstacle in solving cases, and it is felt as a source of stress and anxiety by the officers. Also, the quantity and quality of the equipment are used to assess the welfare of police officers.

**Excessive bureaucracy.** Often, prompt and effective police action is subject to the drafting of papers or obtaining procedures. Police institutions place great emphasis on police paperwork describing the conduct of actions (activity reports), sometimes to the detriment of the action itself. Thus, a policeman with very good operational results may be sanctioned for failure to produce appropriate activity reports or other documents of this kind.

**Efficiency of monitoring and management measures.** In the police environment, control tools used by managers (number of offenses, duration of an investigation, settlement rate of cases in court, etc.) can generate stress both for the person who is assessed, and for the one performing the control.

**Efficiency of monitoring or management measures.** In the police environment, surveillance practices and management tools used for this (the number of offenses, the duration of an investigation, the settlement rate of cases in court, etc.) are not always the most appropriate and they can generate stress both for the person who is assessed, and for the person carrying out the control. Through a survey conducted in the 1990s on nearly 1,000 police officers in the UK it was found that organizational and management characteristics were more stressful than operational tasks at a 4:1 ratio (Wang et al., 2010, pp. 211-216).

**Inadequate reward.** The promotion system is very strict in the police environment and it can generate frustration among police officers because it is often seen as limited and incorrect, based on relational aspects rather than professional ones. Recognition for the proper performance of a task is rare, unlike critics and/or punishment for mistakes, which are common (Mihalcea, 2006, p. 83).

**Difficult cooperation with other Directorates and/or other units.** Interrelation between different services, directions and police inspectorates is sometimes difficult and even ineffective (leading to mutual accusations, information hiding, etc.), which contributes to enhancing stress among the employees who have to deal with conflicts and internal sabotage (Mihalcea, 2006, p. 84).

**Wearing of the uniform.** Research conducted showed that wearing of the uniform, badge and gun may affect employees of police to some degree as it can enhance aggressiveness in public relations. Police uniform is seen by some as a "mask", but this does not relieve work-related stress, which invades privacy and free time.

**Relating with the public.** The policeman operates "in the public eye" and is therefore exposed to the examination and criticism of his work from the public who do not always support the police. Stereotypically, negative public manifestations occur during an investigation, during demonstrations, during strikes or on the occasion of sanctioning, which the public always perceive as unjust.

On the other hand, police are often the subject of public complaints. These potential claims are transformed into long internal and external investigations, which adds stress to this occupation, already stressful by definition.

**Relations with the media.** The media rarely portrays this institution in a positive light. Often, various police actions are presented in a manner inconsistent with reality, some journalists tending to amplify the negative aspects.

**The status of public authority.** Most community members address and treat workers in this field differently, even when they are not on duty. On the other hand, the public perception is that police officers are never off duty, which is why, when confronted with a problem, community members look for a policeman to "solve the problem". „Hence, the difficulty of the policeman to differentiate between situations requiring "problem solving", situations requiring action and liabilities, the action risking to alienate them from the others (Mihalcea, 2006, p. 85).

**Relations with justice.** Duration and complications of a trial that can occur during the course of criminal proceedings also act as major stressors on the police officer who was initially involved in the case.

#### 4. Forms of Stress and its Implications in Police Work

"Stress is the reaction of our body to adapt to those external factors that we perceive as aggressive and that often induce a state of alarm we feel both psychologically (tension, fear, anxiety) and physically (increased secretion of adrenaline, increased heart rate, sweating). It is not a disease itself, but it may lead to disease, in time. Therefore it is good to know what stresses us and how we can relieve stress (Albu, 2007, p. 17).

To effectively combat the negative consequences of stress we need to know, firstly, the types of reactions that can be generated by some events and the degree of danger that they present on mental functioning, so that those affected can recognize the symptoms in themselves or in others.

In their current activity, police officers face multiple stressors, and therefore they have to face various forms of stress caused by their action. Of these types of stress we mention (Liță, 2006, p. 41):

- **basal stress** is the stress experienced by anyone, due to confrontations in daily personal or professional life, with various events, which do not comply with their expectations and to which they react with certain states of tension, frustration, irritation, anger etc.
- **cumulative stress**, which is the result of a difficult event that occurs too often, takes too long and is too severe;
- **nervous exhaustion syndrome** can occur if proper attention is not paid to cumulative stress, and it can cause stressful effects, both professionally and personally. People affected by this syndrome may avoid work and they may not do the tasks of daily living, or they may become totally involved in work and exclude any other aspects of their life.

Common symptoms in people affected by this type of stress include: intense fatigue, loss of self-confidence, sense of helplessness, sadness, anxiety, guilt, refusal to accept that they are in a state of exhaustion, denial of the fact that effectiveness declines, inability to objectively assess their performance, headache, stomachache, backache, etc.

- **traumatic stress** is the result of a single event that occurs suddenly and is very violent, causing physical or emotional injury. Among the generators of traumatic stress one may include both events with repercussions on the person (serious illness, armed attacks, rape, kidnap, etc) and events the person is witness to (death of a person, crimes, disasters, massacres, epidemics, etc.).

In such cases, symptoms may appear immediately or later, and they may include: fear, anger, depression, confusion, obsessive ideas, feelings of worthlessness, feelings of abandonment, loss of meaning of life, difficulty in making decisions,



increased consumption of alcohol, etc. and if these effects are very intense and they occur too frequently, they can lead to the installation of *psychological disorders*. It is therefore recommended that in such situations the person should seek the help of mental health professionals (psychologists, psychotherapists, psychiatrists, doctors).

- *posttraumatic stress (post-traumatic stress disorder)*, is installed when the disturbances caused by a traumatic event persists in time (more than one month). Posttraumatic stress, which can be compared to a physical injury, that does not heal naturally, can have the following symptoms: reliving the traumatic event periodically, avoidance of stimuli reminiscent of the event, exaggerated caution and warning against situations, violent reactions to threatening situations, etc.

Stress can evolve, becoming, in the presence of certain factors (personal vulnerability, severity of trauma, etc.) a neurotic or psychotic crisis or even leading to suicide.

## **5. Prevention Factors and Strategies to Reduce Stress and Combat the Negative Effects of Stress**

Stress, this "disease" of our times, is present everywhere in our daily life. Even in a state of relaxation or sleep we face a certain level of stress. With the ubiquity of this phenomenon, Hans Selye said that "the stress-free state is called death" (Turc, 2006, p. 66).

Stress affects people regardless of their lifestyle or their professional nature, but it has a stronger and more frequent impact in developed countries and in the case of police workers around the world. However, each human being needs energy to constantly adapt to a changing environment and to consciously intervene in their existence, to discover their own resources and to develop adaptation strategies.

Stress levels experienced in the work can be optimized by trying a number of prevention and mitigation techniques, and attempts to combat the negative effects of stress, including (Mînjină, 2006, pp. 168-170):

- informing policy makers on issues of stress;
- improving communication with staff;
- changing priorities in solving working tasks;
- control of risk factors by providing a positive work environment;
- forming of vocational skills necessary to carry out the work assigned;
- ensuring the staff the possibility to plan and control their own activities, to determine how the tasks are to be performed and to choose the solutions to solve current problems;
- establishment of rules and procedures to control all unacceptable behavior;

- developing a culture based on trust and mutual support among employees;
- supporting greater involvement of staff and participation in the changing process by allowing staff to express their views;
- establishing clear roles and responsibilities of staff, job descriptions;
- supporting staff by discussion and encouragement, especially during less favorable periods;
- supporting staff through health promotion activities at work and maintaining the balance of professional life;
- stress prevention through psychological training programs;
- learning relaxation techniques;
- extra-professional activities (sports, language courses);
- courses that provide new information on the activity;
- occupational stress prevention counseling programs for those who exercise risky professions;
- teaching people operating under stress to develop strategies to control stress;
- regular assessment of personality traits to identify any positive or negative changes;
- regular assessment of mental and physical health to identify possible changes;
- development of stress management programs.

In the specialized literature on the subject it is stated that most institutions of law, order and public safety in the U.S. and other countries have had counseling programs for employees for decades. There is great variety of police services and it may include: counseling for police work-related stress, counseling for personal and family problems or family members counseling. With regard to our country, such services are still marked by the mentality that foreigners have more resources than us and in these circumstances, it is useless to invest time and financial resources in developing such programs. To counteract this mentality and to support the importance and necessity to develop and implement stress management programs, we make the following points (Liță, 2006, p. 30):

- stress management programs offer a specialized and confidential way to reduce stress and treat staff and their families, but also to help them to cope with the negative events;
- stress management programs may prove useful for increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of staff and the institution;
- stress management programs have the effect of reducing accidents at work;
- stress management programs reduce the number of public complaints about inappropriate behavior of employees;

- stress management programs have an effect on improving the police image, by reducing the tendency of the media to focus on the negative aspects of the work of the institution;
- stress management programs are reflected in improving the general state of well-being of staff and their family.

## 6. Conclusion

The severity of incidents, increasing the frequency of critical situations that require police intervention, the expectations of the community and the immediate coverage of these events make a policeman's profession strongly exposed to the risk of destruction of personality. Because the stressful atmosphere of the police environment can not be changed, as this type of activity will always include tensions, the police units are currently seeking to select candidates intellectually and emotionally capable of to fully assuming this task. Also, it is clear that today's policemen should protect themselves against stress and have effective means to combat its negative effects and there should be ways to restore those affected.

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