The Bill Blackwood
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PERSONAL CRISIS
Unsafe on Duty

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ABSTRACT

The function of this paper is to construct a notion to law enforcement agencies. This is essential to recognize all types of stress or crisis that an officer may experience, the impact on the officer, fellow officers, and the general public, and to address the departments' response.

This paper will validate that law enforcement agencies are more likely to tend to and recognize officers that suffer a job-related crisis or one that is developed through personal problems. This is contrary to the information that officers are more likely to experience a crisis produced by personal issues that are job-related.

The implementation of policies or procedures to recognize and address all types of crises, regardless of the causes by law enforcement agencies, is vital to officers and the communities that officers serve and protect.

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INTRODUCTION

About a year ago, a friend and a fellow officer of the author was experiencing marital and financial problems. The officer's crisis had an enormous, negative effect on his work performance and attitude. The officer's behavior included arriving late to work on a regular basis, a large number of citizen complaints, and not being attentive to the officer's work duties. The officer's supervisor called the officer in to discuss his work performance and later that day the officer turned in his resignation. The officer quit without giving a two-week notice. This author spoke to the officer that same day and tried to persuade him not to quit the force, suggesting to the officer to take a vacation or request an assignment in a different division. The officer advised that the decision to leave was based on the desires to work on his marriage and spend more time with family. The officer planned to use the pay package to take family to Disneyland and to get out of debt. However, this particular couple being discussed had so much conflict in their relationship; they decided not to make the trip to Disneyland together with their children. Four days after the officer resigned, the officer's nine-year old daughter, who was traveling to Disneyland with other family members, was killed in a traffic accident.

This officer's crisis went unchecked; the officer was not evaluated even though it was known within the department that the officer was going through a personal crisis which was affecting both his personal and work life. The majority of law enforcement departments and other organizations seem to be more sensitive and responsive to job related stress than personal stress. After a work-related serious event, it is mandatory in the department that this author works that an officer attends a debriefing and counseling sessions. Yet, officers experiencing a personal crisis are not required to obtain any help. However, many times, a personal crisis has more of a harmful effect on the officer than

a work-related crisis. As a result, departments often mismanage employees who are going through a personal crisis or who suffer from personal issues. Thus, officers experiencing a personal crisis are permitted to work when their ability to perform safe is diminished. Many officers are not able to keep their personal crisis from affecting their work, just as work-related stress onto their personal lives. It has been this author's experience as a police officer that officers tend to be more seriously affected by personal crisis more so than job-related stress. Having an officer go unchecked or unevaluated during or after experiencing a life event, such as death of a family member or divorce, may cause that officer to be a danger to the officer and others. In addition, officers who do not receive help while in crisis, may subject the department to possible liability.

The purpose of this research is to illustrate that personal stress should be taken just as seriously, if not more than, job-related stress. Statistics show that police officers have an above-average rate of suicides due to job-related stress. This author explores the cause and effect of both personal and work-related stress during a crisis. The research also looks at law enforcement organizations' methods of handling officers experiencing personal stress as compared to job-related stress.

This author examines the responsibility of fellow officers, supervisors, and the department of the officer experiencing a personal crisis. This study also reviews departmental procedures and polices that pertain to personal and job-related stress. The method of inquiry was done by surveying of police officers of various ranks, reading of books and journals, and Internet articles. The outcome of this research demonstrates that departments tend to take care of an officer going through a job-related crisis more than one going through a personal crisis. The research also shows that a personal crisis

usually affects an officer more seriously than a job-related crisis. The benefit of this research is that in the future, law enforcement departments may develop policies or procedures providing officers with additional support in dealing with personal crisis.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Stress is comparable to pain, since it begins at birth and is present throughout life and affects every human being. There are different variations of stress and normal stress is necessary and vital to humans. Stress reactions enable and mobilize people to adapt to changing stimuli. Life is constant changes and events and this demands an adaptive response. Without stress, a person's survival would not be possible (Stein, 1983).

Stress is dangerous if not handle appropriately. When stress-reaction mechanism is strained, the body's hormonal system becomes depleted and can aggravate the body's health. Continued provocation, stress can harm the body's immune function, leaving a healthy body more vulnerable to illness (Stein, 1983).

In studies involving thousands of naval personnel, stressful life events that occurred in the six months prior to military service were compared to shipboard medical records complied during the six-month cruise. Those with the highest number of life changes showed a rate of fifty percent greater than those with the fewest life changes (Stein, 1983). Research also indicates that the absence or reduction of stress is linked to health benefits. In research among heart-attack victims, it was established that a reduction in stressful events led to psychological heath and data suggested an improved survival (Stein, 1983).

Police officers are only not exempt from life's pressures and stresses; the police profession is a consuming profession with very high levels of stress. In many ways,

police officers are trained to control their emotions, which may manipulate the body's system to handle and cope with stress or any other strains.

Every year, the Department of Justice issues a tally of officers killed in the United States in the line of duty. Criminals who used firearms, knifes, or other weapons killed most of those officers. Other officers were killed in accidents. Unfortunately, there are hazards that do not always come from the street which also contribute to an officer's ability to return home at the end of his tour, as well as the ability to function well in a family environment. Larger size law enforcement departments have policies in place or professionals in place to address officers who were involved in critical incidents on duty. However, many officers continue to work while having an emotional situation that may harm or interfere with the ability to be a police officer.

Police suicides are the highest of all stress-related jobs. A specific reason is that the types of stress endure as police officers are different and more complicated. Alcohol can be a large factor in suicide attempts, and the availability and familiarity of guns make suicide easier (Stone, 1999).

A number of ways of handling and coping with stress and crisis can be destructive. The regularity of alcohol abuse within a police department is known to be considerably higher than in the general public (Stone, 1999). Drinking alcohol can be seen as an innocent social affair and drinking with other officers is considered relaxing and a pleasure. For many, drinking is even a masculine attitude for dealing with problems. Those problems are not handled or resolved and drinking becomes a regular routine that often continues at home. This behavior affects and jeopardizes families and careers.

In a website dedicated to police officers and their families named "Tears of a Cop", Terry Constant writes in an article titled "Not So Obvious Police Stress" that:

- Police officers have possibly the highest suicide rates.
- Police officers have a very high rate of divorce, possibly second in the nation.
- Police officers are problem drinkers about twice as often as the general population.

Mr. Constant states in his article that in one study in Detroit found the single, most important factor that leading to police suicide is marital discord. Another study in New York shows that most police officers that commit suicide were intoxicated.   A website is available that has resources to prevent police officers from committing suicide and for survivors of police suicide. That website is National P.O.L.I.C.E. Suicide Foundation- www.psf.org. This website lists the common factors in suicide by law enforcement officers as:

- Alcohol. Coupled with an always-present firearm and depression.
- Breakup of a relationship or marriage. Often, the only people outside law enforcement that an officer can trust are his or her family. When a relationship ends, an officer loses his or her emotional support base.
- Stagnated career.
- An officer under investigation.

According to this Foundation, a survey by USA TODAY finds that there are many more police officers committing suicide than killed in the line of duty:

- In New York, 36 officers have been killed in violent confrontation with suspects while on the job since 1985. During the same period, Eighty-seven officers have taken their own lives, making the suicide rate of 15.5 per 100,000.
- In Los Angeles, 11 officers have been slain on duty since 1989. Twenty have taken their own lives, making the suicide rate of 20.7 per 100,000.
- In Chicago, 12 officers have been slain while on duty since 1990. Twenty-two officers have taken their own lives, making the suicide rate of 18.1 per 100,000.

The Foundation lists a study done by the Fraternal Order of the Police (FOP) that studied suicides among its members. That study found a suicide rate of 22 deaths per 100,000 compared to the national rate of 12 deaths per 100,000. In spite of the number of police officers committing suicides or the suicide rate, another important social problem exists. Police officers are permitted to attend work while experiencing stress or going through a crisis without being without being evaluated. Departments tend to want to deal with stress or a crisis that is job-related more so than a personal crisis or situation (www.psf.org).

A good number of departments do not have the ability to recognize the Early Warning Signs of stress. Many departments do not have a policy or formal plan in place to address such officers. A website that pertains to officer suicide named "Gift Within" lists some of the Early Warning Signs (www.giftsfromwithin.org):

- Personal and Financial problems for which the officer feels there are no solutions.
- Increase in Alcohol use.
- Work-related problems.
- Divorce or break-up of a relationship.
- Increase in sick days.
- Mood swings.
- Depression.
- Recent death in the family.
- Exposure to a work-related trauma.
- Use of deadly force.

Personal problems can make it difficult for an employee to focus on work making a productive worker useless. A police officer having personal problems or stress while on duty could be potentially more dangerous when compared to other professions. This may pose as a threat to the community, the officer and other officers. Each error of the standard "Ten Fatal Errors" that kill police officers are directly affected by an officer

suffering from a personal or work-related crisis. Those errors are

(www.tearsofacop.com):

- Attitude.
- Tombstone courage.
- Not enough rest.
- Taking a bad position.
- Danger signs.
- Failure to watch the hands of a suspect.
- Relaxing too soon.
- Improper use or no handcuffs.
- No search or poor search.
- Dirty or inoperative weapon Attitude.

Researchers have concluded that people suffering from extreme stress and

burnout can bring destruction to their relationships and their jobs, and can cause their

immune systems to break down. An officer needs to know and recognize that the job

greatly affects his family, who can also develop the same kinds of stress symptoms and

reactions (Stone, 1999). The affects of that destruction are increased for the reasons

that an officer is armed and always to be protective and safety frame of mind.

Administrators in law enforcement agencies across the country have

implemented significant organizational changes as a way of recognizing and reducing

officer stress. Many departments are becoming more active in their role of providing

support towards officers and their families through programs, classes, and counseling

(Stone, 1999).

The Employee Assistance Program is a common method available in many

departments, including this author's department. This program provides and makes

available counseling for the officer and family for work-related, family, and marital

problems. Other matters that this program provides assistance are with alcohol and

substance abuse, and post-shooting and incident trauma.

The Early Intervention Program is another program in used by many departments. The purpose of this program is to improve and maintain employee performance and is intended to benefit police employees and assist supervisors in identifying personnel whose performance indicates a problem or issue. This program is primary a tracking systems and reviews incidents of risk. The program identifies and evaluates an employee's work performance and behavior and intervenes when appropriate. This responsibility of developing and administering the program is generally assigned to the internal affairs function. This author's department is currently reviewing the implementation of this type of program.

Police departments play an important part in assisting an officer to maintain a healthy attitude at the workplace. Departments need to have a proactive approach in dealing with an officer's emotional and psychological welfare regardless if the source is work-related or personal.

METHODOLGY

The researcher asserts that most law enforcement agencies tend to address job-related stress more so than personal stress. More police officers are affected by personal stress than job-related stress. To find out, a survey pertaining to personal stress opposed to job-related stress and the department's response survey was conducted at LEMIT (Law Enforcement Institute) Module I. Twenty-five surveys were passed out and twenty-two were returned. The age of the officers who responded was 30 to 60 years old. The survey consisted of six primary questions. The questions pertain to experiencing stress and effects on work performance. In addition, the questions also pertain to the law enforcement agencies responding to situations. The author will address the sources of stress or crisis, the effects on work performance, and

the departments respond. This information will be used to draw suppositions and examine the need of department addressing personal stress comparable to job-related stress. A copy of that survey is attached as appendix.

FINDINGS

The results of the first and second questions indicate that more officers who answered the questions experienced personal stress or crisis at a higher percentage than job-related stress or crisis. Over 95% of the officers have experienced personal stress or crisis compare to 85% have experienced job-related stress or crisis. Officers that have experienced stress or a crisis that were affected at work to be safe were nearly the same percentage. The distinctive difference pertaining to this question is that the departments provided assistance more often to officers experiencing job-related stress or crisis (82.3%) versus personal stress or crisis (23.8%).

The causes of personal stress or crisis frequently relate to family issues such as illnesses or deaths. However, divorce or separations were the number one cause. Six of the 21 (28.5%) officers that had personal stress or crisis are related with divorce or separation. Seven of the 17 (41.1%) of the officers that reported having job-related stress or crisis is related to a violent episode such as death or shooting.

Table 1

	Yes	No	Affect Ability to be safe	Department Provide Assistance
Experienced Personal Stress or Crisis	95.4%	4.5%	71.4%	23.8%
Experienced Job-Related Stress or Crisis	85.0%	15.0%	70.5%	82.3%

Questions three and four pertain to knowledge of co-worker experiencing either personal stress or crisis or job-related stress or crisis. The answers parallel with the information obtained from questions one and two with the same distinctive difference that officers experiencing work-related stress or crisis receive department assistance, (55.5%) more so than officers experiencing personal stress or crisis (19.0%).

Table 2

	Yes	No	Affect Ability to be safe	Department provide assistance
Knowledge of co-worker experiencing personal stress or crisis	95.4%	4.5%	71.4%	19.0%
Knowledge of co-worker experiencing job-related stress or crisis	81.8%	18.1%	66.6%	55.5%

Questions five and six pertain to law enforcement agencies actions and responding to stress or crisis stemming from personal or work-related. Information obtained from the survey indicates the agencies are more responsive to work-related compare to personal stress or crisis in both categories of offering assistance or having a policy or a procedure.

Table 3

	Personal stress or crisis	Work-related stress or crisis
Department offers assistance	14 63.6%	16 72.7%
Department has policy or procedure	5 22.7%	11 50.0%

DISCUSSIONS

Everyday, workers across America show up to work while going through stress or a crisis resulting in productive workers becoming unproductive, workers never realizing

their potential, and workers having difficulty focusing on work. This results in workplaces becoming hazardous. That hazard is enhanced when that worker is seen as an authority figure, works in a quasi-military structured institution, works shift work, in which the "at-work" environment is usually negative and the worker carries a handgun.

The odds of having an officer affected by stress, personal or job-related, on the street are enormous. The officer's mindset to be and act safe is negatively manipulated. Also, the officer's action or response to a serious incident may result in an unfavorable consequence. Furthermore, having this type of officer on duty creates a liability risk for the agencies.

Law enforcement agencies tend to care for officers who are experiencing from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or other work-related crisis. The agencies have different approaches to addressing officers in need of assistance such as EAP (Employee Assistance Programs), Peer Support Unit, Police Stress Unit, In-house therapists, and training to recognize Early Warning Signs. However, based on this author's knowledge, experience and information gained from the survey, law enforcement agencies provide assistance to officers going through job-related stress and crisis. Law enforcement agencies tend not to focus on personal stress and crisis to the same extent. The same survey illustrates that more officers suffer from a personal crisis or stress more so than job-related. Nevertheless, a smaller percentage of officers experiencing stress related to their personal lives are getting the needed assistance and are permitted to work.

This examination was confined to twenty-two survey forms and this author's personal knowledge and experience. An analysis of law enforcement agencies that have policies or procedures that address stress and crisis situations would contribute to this

examination. It is the position of the author that any other information obtained would have been consistent with the information obtained through the survey.

Personal problems, similar to job-related problems, present law enforcement agencies with a difficult challenge. Furthermore, today's work and social environments will continue to put pressure on both personal and work lives. Each problem is unique and every worker handles it different. Law enforcement agencies and other workplaces need to be prepared to adopt, to recognize and handle the different type of stress and problems that affect workers regardless of the causes.

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APPENDIX 1

R.VELA

Age   _____

Sex   Male or Female

Years in Law Enforcement   _____ Sworn officers in Department _____

1)   Have you experienced personal stress or a crisis that affected your work performance?
Yes_____ No _____

Cause of stress or crisis? (optional)
_____

Do it affect your ability to be safe? Yes_____ No_____

Do your Department provide you assistance? Yes _____ No _____

2)   Have you experienced Job-related stress or a crisis that affected your work performance?
Yes_____ No _____

Cause of stress or crisis? (optional)
_____

Do it affect your ability to be safe? Yes_____ No_____

Do your Department provide you assistance? Yes _____ No _____

3)   Do you have knowledge of a co-worker experiencing personal stress or a crisis that affected their
work performance?   Yes_____ No _____

Cause of stress or crisis? (optional)
_____

Do it affect their ability to be safe? Yes_____ No_____

Do your Department provide them assistance? Yes _____ No _____

4)   Do you have knowledge of a co-worker experiencing job-related stress or a crisis that affected
their work performance?   Yes_____ No _____

Cause of stress or crisis? (optional)
_____

Do it affect their ability to be safe? Yes_____ No_____

Do your Department provide them assistance? Yes   No   ____

5)   Does your department offer assistance for:
personal stress or crisis: Yes_____ No _____
work-related stress or crisis: Yes_____ No _____

6)   Does your Department have a policy or procedure that pertains to:
personal stress or crisis: Yes_____ No_____
work-related stress or crisis: Yes_____ No_____

Comments_____