

## HOW SELF-CARE CAN REDUCE POLICE OFFICER STRESS

**By Dan Fish**

How do law enforcement officers end up chronically stressed, burned out and suffering from compassion fatigue? Why do so many officers fail to take care of themselves mentally and physically? And how can we help them achieve better health and balance?

Questions like these are dominating public safety lately. Look at any law enforcement publication, website or conference line-up, and you'll see topics related to physical and mental wellbeing, post-traumatic stress, peer support and other behavioral health issues. (Full disclosure: The inspiration for this article was a presentation called "Keeping the Super Heroes Super," presented by licensed psychologist and organizational consultant [Kimberly A. Miller, Ph.D.](#), at the FBINAA California Re-Trainer in August 2017.)

In part, this shift is driven by sheer economics—recruiting is getting more and more difficult for law enforcement agencies, so we need to find ways to retain good officers. But scientific developments are also driving the change. We're learning more about the essential connection between mental and emotional health and performance. And that changes job-related stress from something we should just "deal with" to something that presents significant risks for law enforcement agencies.

### What's Stressing Us Out?

There's no shortage of stressors in law enforcement. Depending on where you live and work, you may face media scrutiny or community distrust. Then there's the grind of responding to call after call where people are exhibiting their worst behavior or are victims of someone else's bad behavior. But let's focus for a minute on two even bigger factors that underlie these specific stressors.

First, law enforcement officers are hard-wired to focus on the negative. We are always in threat assessment mode. All the way back in the academy, we were taught to focus on the bad things that can happen—because doing so could save our lives one day. This hard-wired approach to focus on the negative can take its toll and make it difficult to differentiate situations where we should be looking for the positive.

Second, law enforcement today is an all-encompassing, 24/7 career. There is a high level of responsibility that comes with being a protector of the public. Coupled with that, [law enforcement culture expects officers to be stoic](#) and strong in the face of adversity. We are taught to resist normal physiological responses to tragedies or critical incidents. This combination creates a perfect storm: The profession becomes all-encompassing, but at the same time we don't provide officers with tools to deal with the effects of the profession.

### How Do We Know We're Stressed?

The consequences of police officer stress pose a serious threat. Before we go further, let's consider a few definitions:



- *Stress* is mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or very demanding circumstances.
- *Burnout* is the cumulative process marked by emotional exhaustion or withdrawal associated with increased workload or institutional stress.
- *Compassion fatigue* is the emotional residue/strain of exposure to working with those suffering traumatic events. It can encompass physical symptoms, such as difficulty sleeping, and emotional symptoms, such as loss of self-worth or anger.

How does police officer stress manifest itself? Consider these possible signs and symptoms:

- Isolation and withdrawal
- Being disengaged or unmotivated
- Physical exhaustion
- Nightmares and flashbacks
- Poor hygiene or apathy about one's physical appearance
- Loss of empathy or compassion
- Relationship issues, including divorce
- Substance misuse and abuse
- Recurrent sadness or depression
- Resistance to feedback
- Resistance to change
- Reduction in meaningful work product
- Reduced job satisfaction
- Increase in citizen complaints

Most of these signs and symptoms can be traced back to depleted energy. For many officers, law enforcement *is* their identity. They don't leave much energy for their family, their friends or themselves. In turn, they can quickly feel isolated when dealing with the normal challenges of law enforcement. Once isolated, it's a short step to despair and depression.

### **How Can Self-Care Help?**

The answer to the devastating consequences of police officer stress is *self-care* for mental health.

You may have heard this term tossed around, but what does it really mean? Self-care is not an exercise regimen or seeing a psychologist (although it could encompass those things). Rather, it's a conscious process of considering our needs and seeking out activities and habits that replenish our energy—*so that we can do our jobs better*. This last part is often difficult to understand. Our Type A personalities often lead us to believe that we do our best when we commit all our resources to something, working ourselves harder and harder. But that's simply not true.

We only have a finite amount of energy each day to expend. Just as taking a day off from the gym can help us train harder the next day, participating in activities outside law enforcement helps us refuel emotionally, which makes us more effective when we go back on duty. Combating the negative mindset also comes into play here. When you consider that negative emotion burns twice as much energy as positive emotion, the challenge and skill to remain positive makes its own case. We need to train officers to regularly assess their energy levels and focus on the positive.

One way to do this is by applying the “For vs. To” test to reframe an experience. Saying that something happened “to me” makes the experience negative and victimizing. Saying that something happened “for me” immediately turns the experience into a positive event and creates a challenge for officers to better themselves by developing their leadership and coping skills. Everything is a lesson and at minimum, in every tragedy/critical incident, there is a test of humanity. That test can develop good character if administered correctly, and should allow officers to feel relief instead of regret. The lesson is to not allow a temporary event to become a permanent state of mind.

Another important factor to understand about self-care: *It’s a perishable skill, just like driving, shooting or arrest and control techniques.* To be successful in maintaining good mental health, officers must practice. So let’s look at a few ways to do just that.

### 3 Self-Care Tools

As I mentioned above, Dr. Kimberly Miller presents frequently on the topic of self-care. She uses the analogy of “filling one’s bucket” with coping mechanisms that help officers stay positive, develop identity and self-worth outside of law enforcement, and be more in touch with their feelings and emotions. Here are three self-care tools she teaches.

1. *Cultivate a life outside law enforcement.* Good bucket-fillers create time for relationships and activities outside of the work environment. Don’t short-shrift your spouse, children or friends for work. Because it can be hard to let go of the job even when you’re off duty, you may at first need to schedule planned activities with family and friends. Otherwise, you may find that you spent yet another evening stewing over the day’s events while your kids played games on their tablets in the other room. Remember, too, that “alone time” is beneficial. Find activities—hiking, swimming, reading, bird watching, listening to music—that you enjoy and make time for them, too. Other tips: Disengage from technology whenever possible or at prescribed times of the day or week, and avoid energy “vampires” (people who demand too much of your energy).
2. *Develop good physical health habits.* Dr. Miller also suggests committing to an exercise regimen—one you can maintain. Consider whether you need to improve your diet, too. Law enforcement officers often find it difficult to eat healthy on shift, but preparing meals in advance can help. Cooking can also be a great way to spend quality time with your spouse and/or children. Finally, do everything you can to get enough sleep. Most people need between 6 and 9 hours. Lack of sleep is linked to many adverse health effects, even cancer, and can worsen the effects of post-traumatic stress. I know it’s not always possible, but when you can, plan for appropriate sleep time to avoid starting the day already low on valuable energy.
3. *Practice meditation and [mindfulness](#).* Dr. Miller and I agree that visualization, meditation and mindfulness also have promise as a focused method of improving the mental health of officers. *Visualization* is a type of meditation about a specific activity or outcome and is widely used by professional athletes to focus on performance. Police officers are very much like professional athletes and this method should be considered as a part of any self-care program. *Meditation* is focused on trying to empty one’s mind of everything so that it can re-charge or clear the memory of negative thoughts. *Mindfulness* is a technique I’ve [written about before](#); it involves

paying attention to thoughts and feelings and how they are affecting you, then altering the thought process to deal more effectively and efficiently with the feelings.

### **Thinking Long-Term**

Our society praises selflessness. That's understandable; our natural inclination is to put ourselves first, and learning to push back against that impulse makes us better citizens and human beings. But like any habit, selflessness can become an addiction. What we often see in law enforcement officers is dedication to the job taken to an extreme. And like any addiction, over time, it begins to cause problems—physically, mentally, emotionally.

Law enforcement agencies have typically done a poor job of understanding police officer stress and helping officers cope. That needs to change. We need leadership role models who will demonstrate the importance of actively choosing a balanced lifestyle. We need peer support and supervisors who show officers that it's OK to feel pain and emotional distress—that doing so builds resilience over time.

We cannot give away what we don't have; unfortunately, too many officers don't understand this concept. Today's officers require a new kind of bravery: The courage to change hard-wired habits and commit to self-care. This is not something we can put off to deal with in retirement—or we might never get there. When it comes to positive mental health, we simply can't afford to trade the now for later.

*[Lexipol's Law Enforcement Policy Manual and Daily Training Bulletin Service provides essential policies that support officer safety, health and wellbeing. Contact us today to find out more.](#)*



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