

Stress & Coping Strategies for Canadian Police Officers

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Introduction

Police officers are often reported to experience high levels of occupational stress, and consequently face numerous effects on their work and home lives. This study examines the reasons behind stress for Canadian police officers, and suggests possible stress reduction techniques to reduce the impact of stress on long-term emotional health. Research was also conducted to identify the feasibility of implementing such techniques in a police subculture. Using a qualitative analysis model, a variety of articles were reviewed in order to determine the prevalence of the issue, and formulate workable solutions.

Background

Police officers are responsible for the safeguarding of the general public, and accordingly, the prevention of negative effects resulting from stress should be of societal concern. While there has been significant research conducted on the causes of stress and factors playing into increased stress levels, there is a dearth of research that discusses practical techniques for officers to use in the field and at home. This study examined various techniques that have been suggested as methods of combatting occupational stress in policing. Although there are many experimental techniques, there are few that have had been widely accepted and implemented across Canadian police departments.

Methods

In order to gather relevant literature for this study, I conducted a comprehensive search and review of the Justice Institute of British Columbia’s online library database (EBSCOhost). The initial search utilized the keywords ‘police’ and ‘stress’, and was constrained to academic journals published within the past 20 years. Emotional health for law enforcement is a relatively new and evolving field of study (Gilmartin, 2002); accordingly, the date range was constricted to the past two decades. These search parameters returned 2,336 articles for review, and through this search I found many articles were simply not relevant to the research. Material from international sources comprised a significant amount of the articles, generating many non-English results. In order to reduce the amount of irrelevant material, I included further search terms of ‘officer’, ‘stress’, ‘coping’, and ‘health’. I maintained the date range parameters, ensured all articles were from academic journals, and excluded non-North American articles. The inclusion of further search terms and additional parameters improved the relevance and reasonability of the search, reducing the search results to 358 articles. These articles were then considered for specific applicability to my research.

Results/Findings

There are a wide variety of techniques suggested for increasing overall coping skills, but there has been less research conducted on possible on-the-job techniques to reduce stress. Conn & Butterfield (2013) suggest some forms of task-orientation and relaxation techniques when officers are required to stay on-scene at a distressing call. It is suggested that individuals who become distressed become self-preoccupied, increasing their levels of anxiety (Conn & Butterfield, 2013). Adaptive cognitive responses, such as breathing exercises and being given specific tasks to complete (either physically or mentally), may serve to reduce anxiety and stress levels. Tsai, Nolasco, & Vaughn (2017) suggest that police officers can reduce job stress through writing and expressing emotion. Rather than 'staying quiet' on their feelings and internalizing emotions, it is suggested that officers discuss stressful/traumatic experiences with a trusted person or a trained professional (possibly through a debriefing) and/or document events in a journal (Tsai et al., 2017).

Discussion

Finding techniques that can not only be implemented, but also widely accepted, was a central challenge encountered in the research. The police subculture can be resistant to change (Gilmartin, 2002), and the likelihood of practical stress coping mechanisms being accepted must be considered when discussing the findings of the research. Police departments should acknowledge that coping skills and stress reduction strategies may be ineffective if implemented with a universal approach. The needs of the officers in each department differs depending on the characteristics of both the department and the officer, and stress reduction strategies should be tailored accordingly (Rineer, 2018). In order to achieve maximum efficacy, it is suggested that police organizations integrate selected techniques into pre-existing departmental training on stress coping. The suggested stress coping mechanisms do not need to replace current interventions for stressful/traumatic situations. Lastly, greater organizational awareness and support was a recurring theme in the research. Without the support of the department, the ability of the officer to reduce the effects of stress may be compromised.

Conclusion

Police officers are regularly exposed to highly stressful situations, and accordingly face increased risk of harm to their long-term emotional health. Task-orientation exercises, breathing exercises, keeping a journal, and discussing stressful experiences with others were all found to be potential coping skills. A fundamental necessity of police-based coping strategies is the ability to utilize them on the job, and all of the discussed skills were found to be workable in the context of policing. An examination of enacting culture change in police departments would be invaluable when further discussing the implementation of stress coping mechanisms as standard departmental practice.

References

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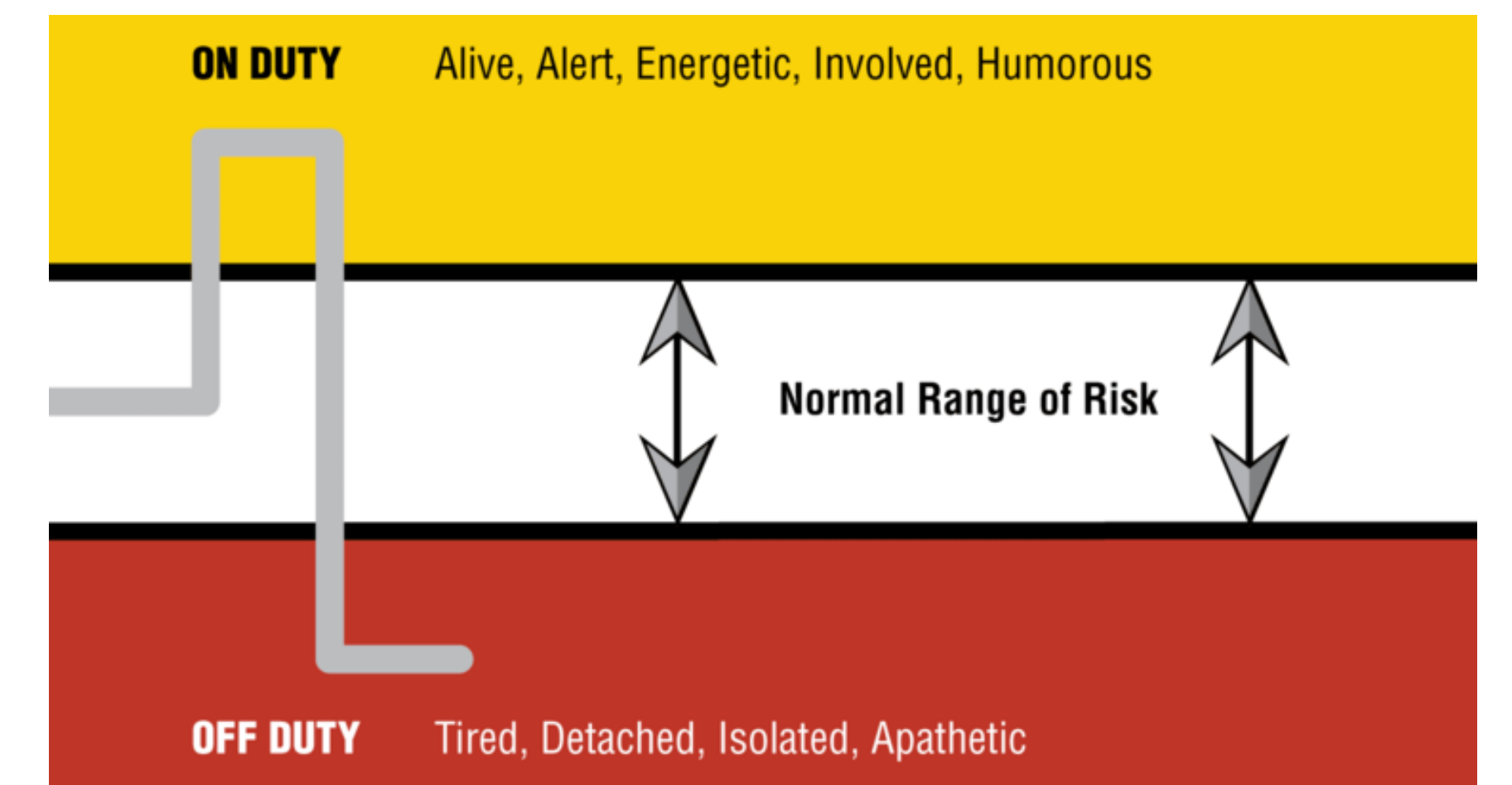


Figure 1. Chart indicating emotional involvement levels for police officers. From “Stress” by K. Foreman, 2011, <https://www.klemagazine.com/home/2016/11/14/stress-is-inevitable-suffering-is-not>