
Stress management as a part of police work

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in stress and its impact on the police workforce. The topic is important because there is an established connection between stress and health, and also the ability to perform during work-related situations that evoke a strong stress response. This paper focuses mainly on stress responses experienced in operational police work. Other potential sources of stress, such as organisational stress, are outside of the scope of this paper. The topic is approached by reviewing research findings on police-related stress research and the practices that are utilised by the Finnish national police. The scenarios encountered as a part of police work evoke both psychological and physiological stress responses. These stress responses either assist or hinder the ability to function in a situation. The paper describes a training method that has been developed in cooperation between Police University College, Finland and the University of Toronto, Canada, to moderate stress responses. The main themes of other research work completed between the two parties are summarised. This includes the police workforce's perceptions on the interaction between stress and health, and the preferred interventions for addressing the symptoms of stress. Not all stress responses and their potential subsequent impact can be avoided by training and careful preparation. This paper also summarises the practice of aftercare procedures in the Finnish national police. In an optimally functioning organisation, both preparation and aftercare procedures are thought through and put into practice. The training of the workforce also has an important role to play.

The paper summarises the training method that is based on research findings and is utilised as a part of the training of police students in Police University College, Finland.

Keywords:

police, stress management, police training, resilience, aftercare

Note

This article has been written for an upcoming publication by the Police University College, Finland: Koskelainen, M. (2016), Stressin käsittely osana poliisin työtä, in: Muttilainen, V. and Potila, P., Poliisin toimintaympäristö, Poliisiammattikorkeakoulun katsaus 2016. It has been translated from Finnish into English with added photographs by the author.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in stress and its impact on the police workforce. There are many definitions of stress and what causes it. This paper focuses mainly on stress responses evoked by operational police work. Other potential sources of stress, such as organisational stress, are outside the scope of this article.



Figure 1

In principle, every police officer has an opportunity to manage and control stress responses evoked by work-related duties.

This can be done by preparing duties to be carried out, moderating stress responses during the event and applying stress-relieving methods after the event. Paying attention to stress responses is important since there is an established connection between stress and health. There is also a connection between the ability to perform optimally during work tasks and the level of stress response they evoke. These themes are approached by reviewing research findings on police-related stress research and the practices that are utilised by the Finnish national police.

What is stress?



Figure 2

There is no simple definition of stress. One way to conceptualise stress is to view it as a situation in which the challenges and demands are higher than the person's experienced ability to deal with them. The situation experienced as stressful may be short or long lasting, and the impact of stress may be felt physically and psychologically.

Separating stress into physical and psychological symptoms is not straightforward. There are clearly physiological symptoms of stress, for example, the changes in the body's hormone levels. Physiological changes are, however, connected to sensory perceptions, thoughts and emotions. Psychological responses can equally lead to physiological changes. In other words, there is a constant interplay between physiological and psychological responses to stress. As noted, the demanding scenarios encountered as a part of police work evoke both psychological and physiological stress responses. These stress responses can either assist or hinder the ability to function in a situation; the level of sensory perception, the ability to make decisions and the actions carried out become better or worse.

In this article, the demanding work-related scenario, or a critical incident, can, for example, be a situation in which use of force becomes necessary. The use of the term critical situation is not, however, only reserved for operational police work in the field. Work-related scenarios, such as interrogations of suspects of sexual crimes, can also be considered examples of demanding police work. In other words, a demanding, and therefore a stressful work-related scenario, can be any policing task that requires the ability to make difficult decisions and manage emotions. In essence, a critical situation is a situation that evokes strong physical and psychological stress responses. Although stress is often regarded as

a negative phenomenon, stress responses are nevertheless essential and useful, even in everyday functioning. In situations that occur in police work, it is evident and essential that stress responses are evoked and experienced. People can usually manage stress in everyday life by utilising their coping mechanisms. The scenarios that police officers encounter in their work, may, however, be very different from everyday life situations and require different coping mechanisms (Rantaeskola et al., 2015).

Police officer stress and health

Police work is demanding work. Police officers face stress via exposure to sudden, critical and even life-threatening situations throughout their careers. Situations that are not sudden, for example, those faced in criminal investigations, may also evoke stress responses, which in turn may lead to cumulative stress. Previous research has shown that exposure to critical situations and cumulative stress has an impact on police officers' health and well-being. It has been shown that police officers have a higher risk than those in comparison groups to get ill, either mentally or physically (Violanti, 2010). In a study conducted in Finland, 40 % of the participants reported that one-fifth of their work time consists of duties they regarded as challenging and demanding.

In the same study, more than half of the officers felt that their job was demanding and stressful (Andersen et al., 2015a).

Can stress responses be avoided?

The elevation of, for example, cortisol and adrenalin levels in the body help the body and mind prepare for a challenging situation. Overly increased levels of cortisol are, however, counterproductive to a good performance. Being able to cope gets worse, if the stress levels remain high and the task is experienced as too demanding. The ability to make relevant observations and to think rationally decreases as a result of continuing stress. The attention also shifts focus on perceived threat and danger instead of a challenge that can be managed. (Andersen et al., 2015c). The stress experienced may cumulate in jobs in which challenging and critical situations are constantly encountered. Constant and repetitive stress that has not been dealt with may result in cumulative stress. This may decrease mental and physical well-being. The constantly high levels of, for example, cortisol in the body may have an adverse impact on the person's health (Violanti, 2010).

Current research has shown that situations encountered in police work can be prepared in such a way that the stress response and, for example, the levels of cortisol, remain optimal (Andersen et al., 2015b). Police University College, Finland has been working with the University of Toronto, Canada since 2013 in conducting police work stress-related studies.

The training method referred to in this article is based on research findings on increasing the ability to manage stressful situations in police work. Resilience is a term now often used to refer to the overall ability to manage such stress. Good resilience means, for example, the ability to face a challenging scenario mentally prepared with an optimal level of arousal. Resilience also refers to the feeling of being in control and viewing the situation to be encountered as a challenge rather than as a difficulty (Violanti, 2010).

Increasing overall resilience can be achieved by including the following elements in the training:

- **Understanding stress and stress reactions**

Psychoeducation about the physiology and psychology of stress is provided: this includes information about the impact of stress on ability to perform in work-related tasks. The link between a critical incident and potential traumatising is also explained. The information given aims to normalise responses caused by stress. It is emphasised that the reactions caused by stress are a part of human physiology and psychology, but it is possible to learn to manage them in a different way (Andersen et al., 2015c).

- **In-depth understanding of what working as a police officer entails**

The process of identifying what work as a police officer entails is facilitated. The person receiving the training needs to reach a point of clarity on whether he/she is ready, prepared, willing and committed to do what the job requires. (Rantaeskolä, 2015, 211).

- **Practical exercises**

Managing stress responses, for example, the correct breathing technique, is practiced as part of police work scenarios that are as challenging and authentic as possible. The exercises conducted aim to simulate real situations in police work. Mental preparation is practiced — which forms an essential part of managing stress reactions and is a crucial part of decision-making, situational awareness and maintaining the ability to act (Andersen et al., 2015c).

The optimal mental state enables an optimal state of arousal. This in turn facilitates the ability to think and make accurate observations that lead to the best possible ways of acting in a situation, (Andersen et al., 2015c). It is also possible that learning about mental preparation during training, and practising it as a part of working life, prevents later traumatising caused by events experienced at work (Papazoglou and Andersen, 2014).

Does resilience training work? Research evidence

As part of the partnership between the University of Toronto, Canada and Police University College, Finland, a randomised controlled trial was conducted to evaluate whether resilience training improved performance and safety during highly realistic critical incident scenarios. The participants were police officers in the Finnish Federal Special Response Police Teams (SRTs). Participants were trained to use mental focus and visualisation to enhance sensory perception and situational awareness, which in turn increases personal resilience and improves job performance (Andersen and Gustafsberg, 2016).

The elements of the training were:

- controlled breathing exercises that aim to enhance physiological control of body and mind;
- imagination exercises within the mind and learning the ability to focus attention on the essential during slow-motion critical incident scenarios.

Participants were trained to utilise the techniques before, during and after the scenarios. The scenarios used in the study were developed by the trainers of the Finnish Federal Special Response Police Team. The aim was to create the most threatening scenarios as possible. The results of the study showed that psychophysical reactions (e.g. cortisol levels, heart rate reactivity and recovery times) were better in the experimental group than in the control group. The overall performance, situational awareness and ability to make decisions, as evaluated by blind trainers of the Special Response Police Team, were also better in the experimental group (Andersen and Gustafsberg, 2016). The results of the study therefore give a positive indication regarding the effect and suitability of the training given in the context of police work.

Finnish national police board order on procedures following critical incidents

Research evidence suggests that mental preparation prior to police-related tasks is beneficial both in terms of managing psychophysical responses and achieving the goals of the assigned tasks. The training model described above assists, for example, in recognising emotions experienced during and after the situation. This helps to understand the emotions as normal experiences that are evoked by a stressful situation. It is also possible that normalising responses to stress prevents negative after-effects (McCraty and Atkinson, 2012). It is, however, unlikely that mental preparation beforehand will always protect against longer-lasting psychological impact, or even the occurrence of post-traumatic stress symptoms. For this reason, the procedures following critical incidents are also an important pathway in processing the stress responses evoked by police work.

The Finnish National Police Board gave an order in 2012 regarding mandatory procedures following critical incidents. The order instructs police units to arrange debriefing sessions, which are carried out by specifically trained police officers. In addition to this, national post-trauma workshops are arranged yearly. The order also gives direction regarding the services that the occupational health and private sector can offer in terms of psychosocial and physical support (Poliisihallitus, 2012).

Debriefing sessions and post-trauma workshops share common themes with the resilience training described above. All include information sharing about critical incidents, the burden they cause and responses they may evoke either physically or mentally. Good experiences and feedback has been received from both debriefing sessions (Järvenpää and Äikäs, 2015) and post-trauma workshops (Järvelin, 2012). It is therefore hoped that these procedures are becoming more and more acknowledged and adhered to in the entire Finnish police organisation.

There is also an ongoing peer support pilot (Kaiku-hanke) in the Ostrobothnian police district that shares similarities with the debriefing practices described in the previous paragraph. Peer support was reported as a desired form of support in a study conducted amongst Finnish police officers (Andersen et al., 2015). The aim of the peer support pilot was to create a model that can be utilised following the immediate debriefing and prior to attending, if needed, a post-trauma workshop.

What is happening in police training now?

Some elements of the above-mentioned training are now utilised as part of the basic higher education degree of police studies at Police University College, Finland. Mind–body coherence and resilience training is incorporated into use of force training (Mikkola, 2015). As a part of understanding the variety of stress responses, the students are also given information included in the order of the procedures following critical incidents. Many Finnish police officers report being aware of the impact that police work may have on their physical health (e.g. sleep problems and heart symptoms).

The majority of the officers, however, also report that they have had no training regarding the potential consequences on their physical or mental health. This is an issue that the current training aims to address. A study on police officers' knowledge of health and police work showed that officers were willing to learn about managing the symptoms of stress.

The preferred method was peer support, but the procedures already in place in the police organisation, such as debriefing practices and post-trauma workshops, were also considered acceptable. (Andersen et al., 2015a). To assist the access to support provided, it

is therefore important that all who work in the organisation are aware of what is offered and know how to seek this support when necessary.



Figure 3

The application of resilience training

The author of this article has used elements of resilience training in a variety of training contexts and with different professional groups (Rantaescola et al., 2015). Examples of these groups include police personnel other than police officers, emergency call dispatchers, traffic wardens and the crime investigation detectives' supervisory group. Based on these experiences, training that includes elements of resilience training can be utilised across many contexts. It is important to note that many of the elements included in the training are not new discoveries. The value of structured resilience training, however, comes from learning a set of skills and being able to apply them as a part of everyday work. Further scientific research is required to support the effectiveness of the training method proposed in different fields of work. As part of this work, it is essential to develop standardised, evidence-based resilience training manuals, which are tailored specifically to a particular group of employers.

Summary

This article has introduced a model of resilience training, research findings regarding it and experiences of utilising the model as a part of police training. Understanding stress responses and successfully processing these experiences is an essential part of the well-being of the workforce. It is important to acknowledge this, since dangerous aspects of police work can never be completely removed. As noted in the order issued by the National Police Board in Finland, it is crucial to prepare the workforce to face critical situations, and in this way prevent potential traumatisation (Poliisihallitus, 2012). The training method and the debriefing procedures described in this article aim on their behalf to fulfil this goal, and are therefore a part of modern police organisations' operating environment.

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