

# **POLICE STRESS AND THE EFFECTS ON THE FAMILY**

**E.M.U. SCHOOL OF POLICE STAFF AND COMMAND**

Sergeant Corey Haines  
Madison Heights Police Department  
Madison Heights, MI

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## ABSTRACT

This research identified many of the stresses that are placed on Law Enforcement officers in today's society. This research explored some of the various stressors and the effects that they may have on the officers and their families. Stress can easily be defined as, "a response to something in the environment ("a stressor") when the environment changes." (J. Mitchell, PhD, G. Bray, PhD, *Emergency Services Stress*)

The purpose of this research paper was to investigate how police officer job stress can negatively affect the officer and his/her family. Information regarding police officer stress relating to the officer and his/her family was difficult to locate and not all forms of stress could be identified.

The research method used for this project relied upon professional papers, magazine articles, and Internet sources.

The procedures involved using past and present information obtained from books, magazine articles, and Internet sources. Research indicated that an extremely high percentage of police officers ended up divorcing their spouse.

Police Officers are stressed by many things including their supervisors, shift-work resulting in the loss of time spent with their families, fellow officers, and the citizens at large. Police Officers are stressed by numerous other factors such as low pay, irregular sleep schedules, and conflict with family and friends. From all of this we can conclude that police officers need training and education to help deal with the many challenges they face daily. With proper support, education, and counseling the officers will be able to perform their job much more efficiently and safely.

Recommendations: This research indicated that when officers were properly trained and had the ability to recognize the effects of stress, they were able to manage their stress more effectively.

This stress management resulted in officers taking less stress home with them to their families and they were able to maintain higher morale. The police departments need to take more responsibility in educating, training, and combating officer stress. The department also needs to provide confidential counseling to officers that are being affected negatively by job stress.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Madison Heights Police Department, like any other Police Department, has officers that are being negatively affected by stress. Stress can come in many forms. Some sources of stress can be the internal or external pressure to succeed, conflicts among family and friends, a lack of self-confidence, or even not getting enough sleep. Especially difficult for police officers is the fact that they do shift work. They are assigned to a particular shift and they must work regardless of holidays or other special occasions. This is especially difficult for the police family, as they often do not understand why their spouse is not home with the family. The family often feels that the officer places his/her job significantly above his/her family.

Some officers react to situations presented in different ways. Something that may severely stress one officer may not stress another officer in the same way. One officer may thrive if given a project deadline while another officer may feel all types of pressures and stressors to make the deadline.

Stress can cause a multitude of problems in the officer's professional and social life. Stress can lead to numerous sicknesses and when the officer brings that stress home to his family life it can cause his family to feel negative towards his/her job. This is just another added form of stress that the officer has to attempt to manage.

The purpose of this research paper was to identify the effects that stress has on the police officer as it relates to his professional and family life and what the department can do to assist the officer in stress management. Also, to identify stressors and find appropriate ways to handle

situations of stress before they become unmanageable and cause negative impact on the officer and his/her family life.

I was able to locate several articles in books, magazines, police related manuals, and related topics on the Internet. I also drew from my personal experiences and the experiences of my co-workers in relation to the way they dealt with stress. As I have been proceeding through a divorce it became evident that my job and the lack of assistance from the department has been the largest contributing factor to the reasons for the divorce.

The main focus of this research paper was to not only identify stressors, but to educate officers to more effectively manage their stress to avoid personal and family crisis.

## **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

The major focus and concern of this paper was the significantly higher divorce rate among police officers versus all other married couples.

The national divorce rate is approximately fifty percent. The divorce rate for police officers is sixty to seventy-five percent. (Dan Goldfarb

[www.soc.umn.edu/~samaha/cases/police\\_stress.htm](http://www.soc.umn.edu/~samaha/cases/police_stress.htm))

“In a 20-25 year career span it is not particularly unusual for an officer to go through 6-8 marriages.” (Police Chief Chuck Pratt, author of *Police Headquarters*)

Hans Selye, the foremost researcher in the world said police work is “the most stressful occupation in America, even surpassing the formidable stresses of air traffic control.” (*Not So Obvious Police Stress* by Terry Constant)

These alarming statistics tell us very clearly that there is a significantly serious issue among police officers that requires immediate attention in order to preserve the high standards and morale of the entire police department.

The purpose of this project is to define and embark upon a course of action the department and community as a whole will be involved with and benefit from.

The School of Police Staff and Command has trained us to become more effective managers and it is the responsibility of us, as managers, to promote a healthy working environment. It is also our job as front line supervisors to help identify the causes of stress and help our subordinates cope with job related stress. Managers should be able to assist subordinates in identifying stressors and help educate them in stress management. Research has shown that as managers we need to take an active role in providing counseling for our officers as it relates to stressful situations whether these stressful situations occur on or off the job. By providing education and counseling to our officers we can assist our officers to effectively deal with stress before it becomes unmanageable. By managing stress more effectively, our officers will have the tools necessary to be better equipped in their professional and personal lives. Too many times officers feel that only other officers understand their careers and problems and this leads to isolation of their families. Too many times officers choose to spend their off-duty time venting their frustrations with co-workers rather than spending quality time with their families. Again, this only leads to other stresses being placed upon not only them but also their families. Their families begin to see that the officer's career is taking over his life and they are being pushed away and feel left out of a very significant portion of the spouse's life.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

An article written by Terry Constant talks about what can be done to decrease police officer stress. “Officers and supervisors should be taught about the symptoms and effects of job stress. Proactive training helps ward off stress when officers encounter it. When an officer suffers from stress reactive counseling and training should be available. Counseling through the psychologist and chaplain should be available for family members. Orientation seminars for spouses will let them learn about the department first hand. Spouses don’t understand the department and often have a biased opinion after hearing officers gripe.” (*Not So Obvious Police Stress* by Terry Constant)

The Madison Heights Police Department, like many other police agencies today, fail to recognize the negative impacts of stress upon their officers. The department needs to not only look at job related stress, but also the stress in the officers personal lives. Both these types of stress are interwoven and contribute to each other.

According to the articles researched, the department can greatly reduce the harm caused by stress by education, training and counseling of the officers.

## PROCEDURES

Research for this project involved reviewing magazine articles, Internet sites, and books relating to job stress. The purpose of this research paper was to investigate how police officer job stress can negatively affect the officer and his/her family. Information regarding police officer stress relating to the officer and his/her family was difficult to locate and not all forms of

stress were able to be identified. Since the research shows that the divorce rate among police officers is 60-75%, a large portion of our personnel is at risk. An investment by the department in training, education, and counseling would pay off in lower stress related costs to the department such as sick time and lower productivity levels.

## **RESULTS**

The research and articles prove that developing an education program and providing counseling to the officers will result in increased efficiency of the organization. An article written by Terry Constant states, "Programs for individuals often help reduce organizational stress. When a department provides a psychologist and a chaplain, the officers see that someone at the top does understand their problems and is trying to help."

Stress cannot be taken out of police work but it can be recognized and by providing help to the officers and family stress caused by the organization itself can be reduced. Extremely important to remember is confidentiality when it comes to counseling. No one in the department should be aware when an officer is seeking counseling. Therefore, the Madison Heights Police Department should create and implement a policy on how to treat and prevent stress. The department must create a non-punitive atmosphere and communicate four clear messages: "1) Seeking help will not result in job termination or punitive action. 2) All information will be respected and kept confidential. 3) Other ways exist for dealing with the situation; no matter how hopeless it seems at the time. 4) Someone is available to help them deal with their problems." (Baker and Baker, 1996)

## DISCUSSION

I conclude that the Police Department has a serious problem where officer's personal and professional lives are concerned.

Job stress is a dilemma that all of us that work outside the home deal with on a daily basis. Pressures begin from the time you wake up in the morning. You immediately begin to think through your upcoming day. Is my uniform clean and pressed, what is first on my agenda that will require my attention as soon as I get there. Some officers have the stress of a lengthy commute to just get to their job. Traffic, fog, rain, bad drivers, and the normal traffic and weather predicaments will affect their attitude on the entire day.

When you arrive at work your day begins. You change roles from father, mother, wife or husband to boss, co-worker, and employee. Your job demands that you leave the personal issues of your life behind before entering your work environment. You have to be able to give your job 100% of your attention to be a successful part of the team. This alone can be stressful because it can sometimes be very difficult when your personal life is complex or especially difficult at any given time. To be able to shut this off is something we all have to strive to do. Bringing personal problems or attitudes to your co-workers can be detrimental to the attitudes of all those around you.

I personally believe that when you bring too many personal issues to the attention of co-workers it will cause them to spend too much time talking about you and your problems to others. They will try to tell you what to do and how they would handle your problems. Then, instead of a productive working environment you have created a gossiping group of therapists.

One way to avoid job stress is to keep your personality friendly. Do your job to the best of your ability. Be friendly and courteous to others but don't overstep the boundaries and get too personal. Your co-workers are just that. They are not your confidants and best friends. When this barrier is crossed you tend to find that you will lose respect from some, be talked behind your back by some and you will feel this tension around you.

Other forms of stress can come from management. All of those not in management positions know we can do it better. We have better ideas, better plans, and would change as much as we could. We create that stress upon ourselves. We should see our own ideas as helpful suggestions to be brought up in work group meetings as a way to promote a better situation for all involved. Management is a difficult position to have in any place of employment. You have to handle all of the office politics, personal issues and be able to work well with those above you and below you. It is a delicate balance that puts you in the middle every day you go to work. Managing requires that not only do you have to take orders; you have to issue them too. Stress will come from knowing some of the orders you give will not make you a popular person. Management is not a popularity contest though and your personal feelings again have to be put aside in order to achieve your ultimate goal. To be successfully in charge of people that will do the job you have given them to do to the best of their ability whether or not they agree with it.

As it relates to all of the research I have done regarding stress leading to divorce, I feel that the research is positive proof of the daily problems that police officers are faced with. As it relates to my own marriage, it proves that an officer can get too caught up in excelling in their profession and they truly let their family relations take second place in their lives. If I would have had counseling available through work during the early part of my career it would have

been possible to have saved my marriage. The daily stresses of the job were allowed to spiral out of control. Although it is true that I did have the choice to attend counseling on my own, it was not monetarily possible. The department has always rewarded those who have put in extra effort to better the community and work overtime. Although the rewards were nice and plentiful from the department it did nothing to assist with my marriage. I allowed myself to fall into the pitfalls of other police officers thinking that I was indestructible. The entire time watching as fellow officers and friends went through divorce and believing that this would never happen to me. I always thought that my life was well balanced, but was so driven by ego that I was unable to see that my life was falling apart right in front of me.

The authors of all the articles I researched pointed out the problems that stress causes and even the high rate of divorce among police officers. No police officer should believe that he/she has nothing to worry about. Stress has a way of eating away at your heart and soul. Not only is stress responsible for causing various diseases and premature aging, but also emotional problems. I began seeing a counselor when my marriage first began to fall apart. Counseling has made me realize that I need to make changes in my life that are good for me. My marriage is destroyed and it is too late to save, but I must be strong and move forward. It has taught me to separate my job from my personal life. Too often we get caught up in the idea that our friends can only be police officers because they are the only ones that understand us. We need to branch out as human beings and realize that there is a whole separate world out there waiting to be discovered and enjoyed. Police Officers need to realize that we are all human and to get away from the macho idealism that counseling is only for the weak. Counseling may have saved my career and my life. I only sought counseling when my life became so complicated that I was starting to have to use sick time in order to keep a handle on my stress so that it would not

adversely affect my career. It took every ounce of courage to walk into my Deputy Chief's office and explain to him the problems I was having at home. My Deputy Chief was very understanding and assisted me with getting the counseling that I needed. However, this created even more problems and stress in my life. Now the department was fully aware of my situation. The department had no means at the time for officers needing counseling. The cost of the counseling is severely straining me financially because my health insurance does not cover the services. The confidentiality aspect has been lost and everyone in the department knows my personal situation. This is not by any loss of confidentiality through the Deputy Chief. It is because I was getting so emotional by the time I built up the courage to speak to the Deputy Chief that everyone knew something was seriously wrong in my life. For the most part the department has been fully supportive but as was stated before, I know that things relating to my personal life are being talked about behind my back, which again adds to the stress.

Many officers will never gain the courage to speak with their Chief or Deputy Chief until everything is completely out of control in their lives and after it has already begun to adversely affect the department. I currently have the added stress of trying to remortgage my home, work out a divorce settlement, work on a serious internal investigation at my department, and stay healthy at the same time. I was notified last week that the township where I live incorrectly reported my tax assessment to my mortgage company causing my house payment to increase by three hundred dollars per month. I also have Staff and Command School and many projects that have had to be done on my own time including my research paper. This is all on top of the fact that my soon to be ex-wife and I argue most of the time and try to avoid being home with each other at all costs. This doesn't even begin to include all the day-to-day chores that need to be

done to keep the house in respectable condition. The stress that I am under at the present time is nearly unbearable.

Counseling has taught me that nothing is impossible. We learn to take life one day at a time and keep working towards a set of goals. If our department had a counselor or chaplain like the authors suggest, it would have greatly assisted me throughout my career. This does not mean for one minute that I wouldn't be in the same situation that I am today, but I would have had help provided to me to keep me strong for the department and myself. A small investment by the department would greatly assist all officers with their professional and personal lives.

In police work we struggle everyday with shift work. We are rarely able to receive our shift of choice until we have many years on the department. Most often the younger officers are placed on the afternoon or midnight shift. For the first several years of my career I was stuck on the afternoon shift from 3pm-11pm. This caused stress and problems in my family life from the onset. I would leave for work before my wife would get home from her 9am-5pm job. I would not return home most evenings until 11:30pm. Most evenings my wife would already be in bed. As most officers know, we need to wind down and relax after work before going to bed so this would make bed time even later. I would rarely get to bed much before 1am. This would also cause problems. Often times it would wake my wife up when I went to bed, after she had been to sleep for several hours. This would interfere not only with her sleep but during the remainder of the day she would be tired and not as effective at work as she should have been. It would also mean arguing when she got home because she would be overtired. It quickly came to a point where I would sleep on the couch in front of the television to avoid conflict. That does wonders for a marriage. It wasn't long after that the only time we would sleep in the same bed is when I would get a day off. Then being so used to staying up until 1am I wasn't ready to go to bed at

10pm. So it quickly became a fact that we weren't sleeping together at all. During that time it didn't seem like a big deal, but looking back it was one of the largest factors that destroyed my marriage. The intimacy in our marriage had been lost and we only had intimacy in our relationship when I had time. As police officers we sometimes get so caught up in the job and what we need to do to get promoted and rewarded that we lose sight of the rest of our lives.

Our job as police officers also keeps us at work for long hours. We may end up with an arrest at the end of a shift. We may be called in at any time of the day or night. We work most holidays which forces our family to celebrate by themselves. The police officer is always at work and when working hours beyond the normal tour of duty we are extremely tired. We tend to put more effort into our careers than into our family lives. We often feel that we worked hard enough at work that our family should be responsible for the everyday chores at home such as cooking and cleaning. This too can build up many stresses and resentments by our spouses. I would suggest that all police officers need to review their lives and careers. Make sure that your family is number one in your life. Make sacrifices from the job to excel in your personal life.

As Law Enforcement Officers we are taught that we always need to be in control of situations. We are taught that in order to gain control of a situation we are permitted to use force if necessary. This force can be as simple as verbal commands or escalate all the way to deadly force. When the officer goes home after his/her tour of duty he/she is expected to immediately shift from being in authority to being an equal. This can breed power struggles between spouses and lead to conflict. A police officer is expected to jump from driving around in a patrol car to immediately diffusing someone else's family argument or arresting a bank robber. A police officer must also always contain his emotions when dealing with the public. By not controlling his or her emotions the officer could find him/herself the subject of a citizen complaint or even

an issue of using excessive force. The officer must be able to turn his feeling off at the flick of a switch. This also often carries over into the officer's personal life causing him/her to not be able to turn his/her emotions back on because of the feeling of weakness or even fear. Police Officers are trained to put these walls up around their emotions to keep from being hurt or take the things that they see on a daily basis too personally.

I could quote numerous passages from other authors highlighting statistics and proving what I and most police officers already know. To do that would be an injustice to this paper. If by relating part of my own life to other police officers will save even one officer's marriage I will have succeeded.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

All of the authors recommend that a department provide confidential counseling and even a chaplain for police officers and their families to talk to. It is recommended that the department formulate a policy and procedure for these services. Our employees are our greatest assets and to have them healthy and well adjusted is of the utmost importance. More extensive research will need to be done to identify an appropriate policy to follow to ensure confidentiality. Giving our officers the ability to speak with a professional about not only their professional needs but also their personal needs will enhance the efficiency of the police department. If an officer is able to reduce the stress that he/she is under at work and at home the result is greater efficiency. The officer will have a better attitude toward work and his/her family will be much more supportive of his/her career in law enforcement. If the department could do as well at

reducing the stress of their officers as they do in rewarding them for extra work the department would thrive.

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