

# **POLICE STRESS: EFFECTS OF CRITICISM MANAGEMENT TRAINING ON HEALTH**

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A survey of law enforcement officers found that stress associated with interpersonal conflict, especially when dealing with criticism from others (both within and outside the law enforcement agency) was rated as one of the highest occupational stressors. Supervisors reported added stress when they were required to evaluate and criticize subordinates. The damaging effects of poor stress management on health has been well documented. The present study examines the impact of a 16-hour stress-inoculation training program, along with two subsequent 1-hour booster sessions, administered to a sample of police officers assigned to field duty. Results suggest that those who participated in the criticism management program reported increased efficacy in dealing with interpersonal stress and reduced health-related consequences.

Policing has long been cited as one of the most stressful occupations (Anshel, 2000; Toch, 2002; Violanti, 1992) and is one of the few professions where individuals must deal with a variety of stressors that exceed the usual expectations of society (Anderson, Litzenberger, & Plecas, 2002; Carlier, Lamberts, & Gersons, 1997; McClaren, Gollan, & Horwell, 1998). Police officers are placed in potentially dangerous circumstances and are frequently exposed to intense situations that can often lead to emotional exhaustion and interpersonal stress (Atkinson-Tovar, 2003; Maslach, 1978; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Toch, 2002).

The consequences of such detrimental stressors are far-reaching. A number of studies have linked the occupational stress associated with police work to numerous negative effects on health

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(Franke, Ramey, & Shelly, 2002; Tang & Hammontree, 1992; Vena, Violanti, Marshall, & Fiedler, 1986). Common conditions include gastrointestinal disorders, high blood pressure, and coronary heart disease (Sheehan & Van Hasselt, 2003). Some research has even suggested that the strain of police work may result in a decreased life expectancy (Coleman, 1986; Fennel, 1981; Kroes, 1985). Jackson and Maslach (1982) noted, "Unless stopped, the compounding effect of job stress...could easily lead to personal disaster for the police officer, including physical disorders such as ulcers and disease, and social disorders such as divorce and suicide" (p. 74).

Several studies have suggested that providing officers with better methods of coping with stressful situations could ameliorate some of these detrimental health effects (Anshel, 2000; Finn & Tomz, 1997; Revel, 2006). Though individual coping strategies differ widely (Aaron, 2000; Beehr, Johnson, & Nieva, 1995; Harr & Morash, 1999; Marshall & House, 1985), "police officers more frequently deal with stress by smoking, having a drink, getting away from people (losing social support) and finding activities to take their mind off their problems" (Jackson & Maslach, 1982, p.71). Professionally recommended coping strategies focus on both proactive measures, such as training programs, as well as reactive measures, including counseling and rehabilitation programs (Webb & Smith, 1980). The stress prevention and coping techniques suggested by the National Institute of Justice not only include exercise, diet, and relaxation/meditation techniques, but also include increased interpersonal skills training as a means to mitigate the deleterious effects of stress (Finn & Tomz, 1997).

From an organizational perspective, agencies should recognize that they have a significant vested interest in an officers' health. Agencies that neglect to address the consequences of stress may face organizational costs such as high rates of workers' compensation claims, tardiness, absenteeism, job turn-over, and unanticipated early retirement (Finn & Tomz, 1997; National Institute of Justice, 2000; Torres, Maggard, & To, 2003). Thus, identifying and working to ameliorate stressors experienced by officers can be important for both the officer and the agency.

The self-reported dimensions of stress by law enforcement personnel have been assessed using the Law Enforcement Stress Survey (LESS). The LESS (Garner, 1993) was created in conjunction with the Minding the Badge program of the Houston-Harris County Mental Health Association and has been administered to hundreds of law enforcement officers over the years. Officers are asked to provide information regarding frequently occurring circumstances which they consider to be most stressful in their occupation. The primary focus of the LESS is to identify the daily hassles (Holm & Holroyd, 1992) experienced by officers rather than single-impact events such as the death of a fellow officer or death of a relative; each of the latter events are clearly impactful, but occur with much less frequency. Contrary to perceived conventional "wisdom," which assumes that police officers deal with the greatest stress when handling events such as felonies, police chases, or other such activities, the stress associated with interpersonal conflict, particularly criticism, was rated as one of the most significant stressors. Additionally, supervisory officers related that they experience considerable stress not only when they receive critical comments from others, but also when they were required to evaluate subordinates (Garner, 1997).

Interpersonal stress has often been cited as a significant stressor in law enforcement (Phelps, 1975; Sheehan & Van Hasselt, 2003; Violanti, 1997). Interpersonal stress can accrue when bureaucratic rules strictly govern what is permitted and prohibited during interactions (Maslach, 1978), especially for police officers who can perceive their interactions as depersonalized (Violanti & Marshall, 1983). Additionally, poor skills development and ineffective methods to address interpersonal conflict can exacerbate the problem. Police officers report that significant interpersonal stress arises directly from conflict during interactions with administrators as well as consumers of police services (Burke, Shearer, & Deszca, 1984; Stinchcomb, 2004). This mirrors other research that finds poor interactions at work, particularly with one's supervisor, can be among the most stressful aspects of the job (Hogan, 2007). This finding holds true across numerous countries, organizations, and industries.

By the very nature of the work, police officers are prone to receive complaints and criticisms from the public as well as their supervisors. If police officers lack the appropriate skills to properly manage such criticism, they may then engage others with maladaptive responses that, in turn, may ultimately perpetuate and escalate the perceived stress of the interpersonal interaction. In order to avoid such circumstances, it would be prudent for police officers to receive appropriate interpersonal training, especially in criticism management, as a means to buffer the ill effects of such stressors on their health and well-being.

Cherniss' (1980) research on stress identified that "the most commonly noted gap in training involved the interpersonal basis of professional work" (p. 220); particularly noted was the need for greater training in interpersonal conflict resolution skills. Seemingly, this circumstance has changed little since Cherniss' observation (e.g., Garner, 1997, Sheehan & Van Hasselt, 2003; Patterson, 2003; Violanti, 1997). Officers are not provided with much, if any, training in interpersonal stress management, and no such recurrent training is routinely required by state commissions that regulate law enforcement training (Garner, 1993). Some training is often available in the more general area of conflict resolution; however, this is typically focused on the officer's role in mediation and resolution of disputes among the citizenry. Although some past research has noted that general conflict management training can increase police performance (Garner, 1997; Zacker & Bard, 1973), this does not address the impact of interpersonal stress for the officer. There has been little attention paid to this important issue. The impact of a targeted program that specifically addresses ways in which officers can better handle criticism and criticism-prone situations is the focus of this study. It is anticipated that a program designed to provide officers with the tools to better handle criticism and interpersonal conflict will result in greater interpersonal mastery and self-reports of reduced levels of occupational stress and associated adverse health consequences.

## METHODS

### *Participants*

Participants were 63 licensed Texas law enforcement officers from three participating criminal justice agencies. The subjects were assigned to attend recurrent training at a regional police academy.

### *Materials / Instrumentation*

Based on the results of the LESS and other relevant studies, an advisory group of law enforcement officers and administrators, representing all levels of operations, was solicited to provide their input, experiences, and critique of the available literature on appropriate areas of interpersonal conflict, particularly including: communication skills, dealing with criticism, conflict resolution, and similar topics. Additionally, psychologists, professional academicians, and curriculum specialists provided insight and direction in the development of the training curriculum. As a result of this process, a 16-hour Criticism Management / Stress Inoculation training program was created (based on the inoculation model patterned after the work of Meichenbaum and Deffenbacher, 1988), along with two 1-hour booster / refresher sessions. The first booster sessions was designed to be administered approximately 1 month after the initial 16-hour program, and the second booster was administered 1 month after that; or 2 months after the original training. The stated primary focus of the curriculum was to address a particular training need that was identified by the results found in the LESS and other relevant research; specifically the goal was to attend to the various aspects of giving and receiving criticism. The course outline was submitted and approved by the commission that regulates law enforcement training as meeting all necessary criteria for police in-service training. A topic outline can be found in the appendix. The major areas addressed in the finalized curriculum were designed to offer practical advice and skill development in dealing with interpersonal conflict, especially criticism.

### *Design and Procedure*

In order to establish the greatest methodological rigor while working in the dynamic environment of a field setting, a three-group post-test only design was employed. This effort required a substan-

tial commitment on the part of the participating agencies and the individual participants. The sizable logistical challenges involved in this study were attenuated by the desire of the participating agency commanders to work directly with the researchers in developing a program that could have far-reaching implications. All participants were routinely assigned by their agency to attend in-service training at the regional academy. Despite this official assignment, all participants in each of the two active conditions were informed that their participation in any particular in-service topic was voluntary and were provided with an alternative training topic if they so desired (none exercised the option). The participants were told that various training curricula were being evaluated and that they would be asked to complete confidential ratings on related issues, depending on the instruction they received.

Twenty-one subjects from each agency were randomly assigned to one of three groups. Group one received the 16-hour Criticism Management / Stress Inoculation training program, along with two subsequent 1-hour booster sessions administered after the original training. The first booster video was offered approximately 1 month after the primary training event and the second booster was administered 2 months after the original 16-hour course. The training involved an overall approach which paralleled that described by Meichenbaum and Deffenbacher (1988). This three-step process involved: 1) a conceptual phase—assessment, examination of coping skills, cognitive restructuring, problem-solving; 2) skills acquisition—discussion of specific coping skills and techniques, including relaxation training; and 3) application and follow-through—refinement of specific skills and application in role-playing scenarios.

Group two was the placebo training condition, where subjects received a 16-hour training program dealing with criminal and civil law. This was a routinely scheduled in-service program consistent with usual law enforcement training. In fact, this training was required for all members of the participating agencies and was ultimately attended by members of all groups after the conclusion of the study. This group also received two 1-hour refresher sessions in a similar timeline as group one. The use of this alternate training

program in the study helps to address the rival plausible hypothesis that could suggest merely associating for a training event could impact some of the dimensions under examination.

Group three received no training during this time. As a result, this group was considered a complete control.

All primary training was conducted at the regional law enforcement academy and consisted of two days of classroom activities (16 hours). The 1-hour follow-up booster sessions consisted of video presentations that were viewed by the officers at their respective agencies.

#### *Dependent Measures*

One month after completion of all training and booster sessions, participants in all conditions completed a questionnaire that incorporated three general areas of interest. Participants provided information on: 1) their perceived level of health, 2) self-efficacy in dealing with criticism-prone situations, and 3) perceived level of stress. The questionnaire was similarly constructed to the one used by Garner (1993). Each section of the questionnaire was assessed separately. Participants self-reported their ratings using a Likert-type scale.

Additionally, archival data on each participant was obtained for the 3 months after the completion of all training. All data were coded by appropriate supervisory personnel within each participant's individual agency. No names or other identifying features were reported, and researchers took appropriate steps to protect the participant's privacy. The information from the supervisors included the number of sick days taken, duration of illness, a modified performance evaluation dealing specifically with the area of handling conflict, departmental discipline records, and professional service questionnaires. The supervisors were asked to report this information and rate all subordinates for whom they were responsible—not just those attending training in any of the previously described conditions. Supervisors were not directly informed as to which training conditions officers were assigned; however, it is reasonable to assume that they may have deduced such information. It is important

to note that the supervisors were not notified until after the conclusion of this study that their ratings were utilized in this project. The supervisors were informed by their commanders that an overall departmental evaluation was occurring and these ratings were attributed to that effort. It is believed that this approach mitigated any potential rating bias that might have occurred if the supervisors were directly informed of the experimental conditions or objectives. From the perspective of a supervisor, they were merely being asked to provide relatively routine objective and subjective data for use by agency commanders.

## RESULTS

A between-subjects multivariate analysis of variance was performed on the dependent variables of criticism self-efficacy ratings, perceived level of stress and perceived level of health ratings, performance evaluation ratings, and the number of sick days taken and duration of illness. The independent variable was group assignment (intervention, placebo, control).

The MANOVA revealed that there were significant differences between the groups,  $F(8, 114) = 10.94, p < .0001$ . Univariate analysis with Tukey's post-testing indicated that there was a significant difference between Group One (intervention) and the other two groups on four dependent variables (criticism self-efficacy,  $F(2, 59) = 59.44, p < .0001$ ; levels of stress,  $F(2, 59) = 8.54, p < .001$ ; level of health,  $F(2, 59) = 6.85, p < .002$ ; and performance evaluation,  $F(2, 59) = 7.04, p < .002$ ). (See Table 1, opposite.) The archival measures of sick days and duration of illness were not significantly different, although the trends were in the anticipated direction. The infrequent and inconsistent discipline records and professional service questionnaires were deemed insufficient for analysis.

**Table 1.**  
**Group Means on Dependent Variables**

|                        | Group 1<br>Intervention | Group 2<br>Placebo | Group 3<br>Control |
|------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Criticism Efficacy     | 8.09**                  | 5.35               | 5.47               |
| Perceived Stress       | 7.38**                  | 6.30               | 5.57               |
| Perceived Health       | 6.43*                   | 4.70               | 5.28               |
| Performance Evaluation | 5.33*                   | 5.75               | 4.62               |

\*\* =  $p < .001$ ; \* =  $p < .01$

## DISCUSSION

Interpersonal conflict is among the more significant stressors identified by policing personnel. Such conflict is rated by police officers as having a more significant impact than events such as pursuits, homicides, robberies, and incidents involving weapons discharge. The results of this study suggest that law enforcement officers who participated in the criticism management / inoculation training program were positively impacted. They reported a greater efficacy in dealing with criticism-prone situations, less general job stress, and fewer health complaints than those officers in the control groups. While not statistically significant, the intervention group also reported fewer sick days, and the duration of illness / sick time was less than those in the control groups.

Convergent data revealed that performance ratings completed by the officer's immediate supervisors were higher on those items relevant to this study (e.g., interpersonal performance, handling conflict) for those persons who received the intervention. This significant result was not a self-report measure, but a rating made by an independent observer. These findings provide support for the implementation of such criticism management programs in other law enforcement settings. Given the significant personal and organizational costs that can be associated with the poor management of

interpersonal stress, this area of research requires additional examination. More encompassing and longitudinal studies are indicated, as well as a more thorough examination of which components in the training may have contributed the greatest benefit.

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**APPENDIX:  
TOPICAL / COURSE CURRICULUM OUTLINE**

SUBCOURSE TITLE: Criticism Management for Police:  
Dealing with Criticism and Interpersonal  
Conflict

COMPETENCY AREA: Knowledge/Communication Skills/  
Interpersonal Skills

RATIONALE: Inclusion based on a needs assessment of field practitioners and the results of the LESS survey finding that officers suffer deleterious effect of stress as a result of being ill-prepared to handle the impact of interpersonal criticism and criticism-prone situations.

DESCRIPTION: In order for us to be maximally effective, we need to possess skills that will allow us to more successfully communicate critical information and deal with criticism and critical comments more successfully. This course offers specific suggestions and strategies on how to address criticism, criticism-prone situations, and better engage in critical conversations with others—particularly in circumstances where accountability is important.

PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES:

After successful completion of this subcourse, the participant should be able to:

- Critical Conversations
  - o Address the importance of communicating critical information to others, e.g., feedback, criticism, performance evaluations, etc.
  - o Define some of the more important problems associated with criticism and critical conversations.
  - o Consider the psychophysiology of dealing with criticism and critical information.

- o Examine the problems of emotions and feelings.
- o Consider the impact of the “story” we tell ourselves.
- o Recognize that changing our story can change our attributions and interpretations.
- o Consider the problem of either/or thinking.
- o Examine the three critical skills necessary to restore mutual trust.
- o The importance of “Conversational Contrasting” in dealing with critical conversations.
- o Discuss strategies for more effectively keeping a conversation “safe.”
- o Recognize the accountability – blame formula.
- o Consider the importance of “contribution” rather than blame.
- o Explore the “mediators perspective” to critical conversations.
- o Explore the “listening from the inside out” perspective.
- o Consider ways to ensure you are focusing on THE correct conversation when dealing with critical conversations and circumstances.
- Dealing with Criticism / Critical Communication
  - o Recognize some of the reasons that others offer criticism and why we often criticize poorly.
  - o Recognize how properly communicated criticism can hold others accountable without adversely impacting the interpersonal relationship.
  - o Appreciate some of the various psychological and philological aspects to critical communications.
  - o Better recognize some of the emotional triggers that escalate events in criticism-prone situations.
  - o Consider why both receiving and delivering criticism can concern us.
  - o Recognize the differences and distinctions between productive and constructive criticism.
  - o Examine the elements of productive criticism from a workplace perspective.
  - o Recognize a better, step-by-step process that can be used to more effectively communicate critical information and criticism.
    - Before Giving Criticism (10 steps)
    - When Giving Criticism (10 steps)
    - After Giving Criticism (4 considerations)

- o Practice methods of cognitive restructuring so as to better deliver critical communication.
- o Redefine the term “criticism” to better reflect the origin of the term and the leadership intention of criticism.
- o Consider the importance of using questions in addressing critical concerns.
- o Identify ways to not only deliver criticism, but to better receive critical information from others using the LAURA method.
  - Listen empathetically
  - Appraise the criticism
  - Understand the criticism, the situation, and the critic
  - Respond effectively
  - Assess the outcome
- o Consider better ways of responding to critics by considering the ABCs of Critical Communication.
  - Accept
  - Blanket
  - Clarify
  - Dismiss
- o Identify ways to actually solicit criticism from others to better enhance our own performance.
- o Practice more effective ways to offer feedback and critical communication to others that can enhance and improve job satisfaction for all.
- o Recognize the TEN characteristics of exemplary criticism managers.
  - See it as an Opportunity
  - Accept the Truth
  - Honest assessment
  - Separate the criticism from the critic
  - See criticism as information
  - Remain in the third person
  - Potential for personal development
  - Does not dwell
  - Learns the lesson
  - Evaluates improvement

Received: May 2008  
Accepted: September 2008

Suggested Citation:

Garner, R. (2008). Police stress: Effects of criticism management training on health [Electronic Version]. *Applied Psychology in Criminal Justice*, 4(2), 243-259.