

The Impact of Stress and Fatigue on Law Enforcement Officers and Steps to Control It

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By **Mark Bond**, *professor of criminal justice at [American Military University](#)*

Law enforcement officers recognize that stress is part of the profession and working conditions. In the past, police culture did not recognize stress as a problem affecting their officers. However, there is now plenty of evidence and research showing that unmanaged stress can lead to anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

What many officers might not be aware of is the long-term effects of chronic fatigue and the relationship between stress and fatigue. Not getting enough rest and not eating properly in order to fuel the body can increase the effects of fatigue. Being fatigued on-duty causes many issues such as poor decision making and other cognitive task difficulties.



Being sleepy on duty is a known deadly error that leads to complacency and increased accidents.

When stress is preventing normal sleep times (6 to 8 hours, recommended), an officer can quickly encounter sleep deprivation. A study conducted in 2011 compared the effects of sleep deprivation to excessive drinking of alcohol and found the effects on a driver were very similar.

Both sleep deprivation and alcohol caused impaired speech, inability to balance, impaired eye-hand coordination, and falling asleep behind the wheel (Senjo, 2011). When officers are constantly fatigued after their shift they often do not find the time to unwind, change gears, and enjoy their time off away from the job.

Effects of Fatigue on Performance

A 2012 study on police officer fatigue revealed the following alarming facts (Basińska & Wiciak, 2012). Fatigued officers:

- Use more sick time
- Have difficulty managing successful personal relationships
- Have time management issues (reporting for duty on time)
- Mistakes on departmental and court paperwork
- Sleeping on duty (rotating shiftwork)
- Generate higher rates of citizen complaints for reported misconduct
- Tend to have problems communicating with supervisors and have stressful relationships with superiors
- Problems testifying in court regarding being prepared
- Experience more accidental injuries on duty
- Early retirement (burnout)
- Are at a higher risk of being seriously injured or killed by not focusing and recognizing danger signs

Even with the current departmental manpower issues caused by the current economic times, already overworked officers continue to work double shifts, special patrol details, and second jobs. Studies have shown that fatigued officers have performance issues on and off duty. Officers are willing to sacrifice their health and safety by accepting the increase workload to provide the extra income for their families, despite the warning signs caused by working while fatigued.

It is the responsibility of elected officials and senior law enforcement officers to bring reasonable balance through policies that are supported by research. Recent studies show that police culture still supports the mentality that working more is better for your career, despite the data that chronic fatigue causes serious performance and health issues (Basińska & Wiciak, 2012; Senjo, 2011).

Health Issues with Chronic Fatigue

The research tells us that chronic fatigue affects the mental and physical health of police officers (Basińska & Wiciak, 2012; Senjo, 2011). Fatigued officers:

- Have impaired judgment
- Experience weight gain or unhealthy weight loss
- Increase in and presence of severe mood swings
- Impaired eye-hand coordination
- Increased anxiety or depression
- Increased change of substance-abuse addiction
- Gastrointestinal problems (loss of appetite and/or stomach ulcers)
- Increased reports of back pain and frequent headaches
- Increased chance of PTSD
- Inappropriate reactions to a situation (excessive use of force)
- Increase risk of serious health problems such as diabetes or cardiovascular disease



Steps to Reduce Police Fatigue

The working conditions of law enforcement officers are not likely to change given the realities of the current economy. But there are things that officers can do to control it. For example, officers can control how they choose to react to stressful incidents and must acknowledge that fatigue plays a direct role on personal stress levels. Officers will react as they have been trained when they are properly rested and alert. There are several steps that an officer can take to reduce their personal fatigue (Basińska & Wiciak, 2012; Senjo, 2011).

Law enforcement officers can:

1. Plan meals and make healthy eating choices, and stop eating high-calorie fast food
2. Plan vacation and down time
3. See your doctor regularly for check-ups
4. Share the workload and reduce the amount of overtime
5. Live within your means so that “moonlighting” that second job is not necessary
6. Create a realistic exercise program and form healthy habits
7. Create a “Patrol Buddy” program and make time to check on each other
8. Keep your civilian friends and get away from the job (no shop talk on down time)

About the Author: [Mark Bond](#) has worked in law enforcement and has been a firearms trainer for more than 29 years. His law enforcement experience includes the military, local, state, and federal levels as a police officer and criminal investigator. Mark obtained a BS and MS in Criminal Justice, and M.Ed in Educational Leadership w/ Summa Cum Laude Honors. As a lifelong learner, he is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in education with a concentration in distance education. Mark is currently an assistant Pprofessor of criminal justice at [American Military University](#) & [American Public University](#) and is one of the faculty directors in the School of Public Service & Health.

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