

# Personnel Fortitude

**Encouraging members to take care of themselves ensures they are physically & mentally fit for duty.**

BY TIM DIETZ, MA, LPC

**I**n my last column, I discussed how taking care of the customer (practicing compassion) is one key to creating a strong foundation for behavioral health within our departments. In this article, I will discuss the second key: Pre-incident tools for taking care of ourselves. If we don't take care of ourselves, we can't take care of others.

One of the best things we can do to take care of ourselves is to enhance our ability to handle stress, in other words, become more resilient. There are many stress-management theories, but none of them is a fix-all for every person and every situation. Each of us needs to identify what works for us, and then we need to actually do those things. In my experience, the following choices have a universally positive effect on a first responder's ability to manage stress.

## 1) Take Training Seriously

Vince Lombardi once said, "Practice does not make perfect. Only perfect practice makes perfect." You need to train as if your life (or someone else's) depends on it, because it might.

Listen, I spent some time working in training. I know how popular training calendars are. But consider this: Let's say your training schedule has you throwing ground ladders, and you already know how to throw a ground ladder, so you don't take the training seriously. You don't give 100 percent. That evening, you respond to a three-story apartment complex with people on the third-floor balcony getting ready to drop their kids to the ground because fire is blocking the interior stairwells. You need to throw ground ladders quickly and competently, but it's not easy. This structure isn't a concrete drill tower surrounded by smooth, even asphalt. It's an apartment building surrounded by shrubs, other landscaping and parked cars. The terrain isn't flat; it's soft and uneven because it has been raining. It's dark outside, and there are many overhead wires to navigate. People are screaming, there are lights shining in your face, and the glow and sound of the fire are distracting. When you look up to set the ladder against the building, you get rain or water overspray in your face, and crap, someone just dropped their child because they can't wait for you any longer. This is an extremely stressful event that could have been made less stressful had you taken ladder training seriously earlier in the day. Whether you are a police officer at the shooting range or a medic being asked to train on intubations for the sixth time in a year, it makes no difference. Nothing can replace the confidence—and calm—that frequent, focused training provides.

**W**hen hiring new employees, fire departments should introduce the concepts of stress-resistance and resilience, and they should provide tools/support to help responders recover after especially traumatic calls. All new-employee indoctrinations—not just those geared toward rookies or new recruits—should explain or reiterate that public safety is one of the most stressful occupations. Department leadership should ensure that new employees know:

- Where stress comes from, e.g. environmental (inter-department, politics) and responses (death, seriously injured people, calls involving children).
- What stress looks and feels like.
- What they can do to protect themselves from stress or lessen the stress response (resilience).
- How to access resources the department provides.

Most important, make sure new employees know that if they experience a stress reaction, it is not a sign of weakness, and it doesn't mean they chose the wrong career. It is a sign the department hired a human being.

## **2. Exercise**

By now, we all know that physical fitness is the best way to reduce physical and mental stress on the job. Here's why: Exercise eats up residual stress hormones that aren't designed to sit idle in your blood stream. These residual hormones not only accelerate aging and deposit fat around your waist, but damage your immune system, your neurological system and your cardiovascular system. Exercise also helps your body produce serotonin, which alleviates depression, and it keeps you physically fit for duty. In his book, "The Secrets of Resilient Leadership," Dr. George Everly states the following regarding exercise: "The 'hypokinetic theory' of disease argues that most stress-related diseases arise because of a lack of physical activity. The remedy is to engage in a routine of exercise."<sup>1</sup> It makes sense. Regular exercise improves cardiovascular function, endurance and strength. It also bolsters self-confidence, reduces anxiety and depression (thanks, serotonin!), and helps us maintain healthy body weight.

## **3. Eat Right**

I'm not a nutritionist, but I think most of us know what is and is not healthy to put into our bodies. Stick to a well-balanced diet. Proteins are important to enhance energy and mood. Cut down on the level of simple carbohydrates you consume (sweets/soda). Use supplementary vitamins, especially vitamins B, C and E, for they can curb levels of stress hormones and boost immunity. Limit the intake of caffeine (always a crowd pleaser in the fire house), salt, sugar, white bread, processed foods and foods with a high fat content.

## **4. Keep a Healthy Work/Life Perspective**

We frequently identify with the uniform we wear and the job we do: "I am a cop," or "I am a firefighter." It's good to be proud of our profession, but let's not forget we are also a son, daughter, parent, sibling, spouse or partner. How much energy do you invest in these relationships and life beyond work? This is always a tough message to deliver to first-responders given our personality type and our desire to be the best at our jobs, but I have to say it: As irreplaceable as you think you are at work, your department will continue after you leave. That fire engine will continue to respond to alarms, with you or without you. As a matter of fact, your co-workers would love the overtime, plus there are a lot of folks who would love to have your job. Your family, on the other hand, would have very different feelings if you were no longer in their lives. You are in the business of seeing bad things happen to people. In fact, you get a paycheck because bad things happen to people. Yet for some reason, many of us think we're immune to bad things. We aren't! If we have one advantage over the general population, it is that we know how precious life is, and how quickly things can change. Be good at your job, but also be good at being a son, daughter, partner, parent and friend.

## **5. Laugh. Have Fun.**

We just discussed the importance of investing time in relationships beyond work. The human brain is wired to be social. Being happy and laughing are also important components to stress resiliency. Have fun! Smiling releases dopamine, which produces feelings of happiness! Laughter releases endorphins as well as other chemicals that reduce stress by slowing the release of stress hormones, act as natural pain killers, boost the immune system and give you a general feeling of well-being. There is no greater feeling than sitting with people whose company you enjoy. They can serve as sounding boards during stressful times, be sources of humor and/or participate as partners for activities. Develop close relationships with your spouse, partner, kids, siblings, parents and friends. Associate with people you find funny, attend comedy films and/or plays or read humorous books and magazines.

**T**he very nature of our job places us in situations where we see people in dire circumstances. Even though we may be resilient to the everyday stressors this occupation presents, there will be times when we are caught off guard or overwhelmed by human tragedy. This is OK. It is normal. To remain healthy and avoid burnout, consider the previous suggestions as a way to take care of yourself so you can better care for your co-workers, your family and those we serve. **BS**

### Reference

1. The Secrets of Resilient Leadership: When Failure Is Not an Option. 2010. DiaMedica Publishing, New York, NY. pp.126.



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