**Lesson 22: Stress Management**

**Introduction**

This lesson consists of:

1. Concepts of Stress and Stress Management
2. Kevin Gilmartin's Special Case intertwined
3. Kevin Gilmartin Special Case

2. Student Journal Entry

**Assignment**

1. **Read the Course Guide**,

2. When you solve a case study or act as a leader in your organization:

I. ***Identify*** the **Areas of Interest**.

II. ***Analyze*** the situation using Stress and Stress Management Theory.

A. ***Identify*** the actual and perceived demands on people in this situation.

B. ***Identify*** peoples’ actual and perceived capabilities in this situation.

C. ***Identify*** the stress responses evident in this situation.

D. ***Classify*** the stress responses, indicating which are the results of the demands placed on the individual and which are attributable to a lack of individual capability.

III. ***Explain*** how an individual’s perception of demands and capabilities results in stress and how individual stress impacts individual, group, and organizational outcomes.

IV. ***Select*** an appropriate theoretical leader strategy(ies) to address Areas of Interest.

V. ***Apply*** the theoretical leader strategy(ies) to the situation in the form of a specific leader plan that addresses all Areas of Interest.

VI. ***Assess,*** evaluate, and revise your leader plan.

3. **Complete a Student Journal entry** for Stress and Stress Management Theory.

Think about a police work group of which you have been either a member or a leader. Describe a situation where a group member experienced dysfunctional stress. What demands piled up for the stressed-out group member? What capabilities did this person lack that might have helped the situation? How did he or she react to the stress? What actions did his/her peers or leaders attempt in trying to help this individual? In retrospect, what else might have been tried to help this person?

**Stress and Stress Management in Policing with Insights from Kevin Gilmartin's Special Case**

1. **Identify the actual and perceived demands on people in this situation:**

In the policing profession, officers face both actual and perceived demands that shape their stressful experiences. Actual demands include responding to life-threatening situations, maintaining public safety, and managing interpersonal conflicts with colleagues and the public. These challenges are further complicated by time constraints, the expectations of supervisors, and the emotional toll of witnessing human suffering.

Perceived demands, however, extend beyond the tangible aspects of the job. Officers often feel pressure to maintain a strong image of control and composure, navigate inefficiencies in the criminal justice system, and cope with the emotional strain of repeated exposure to violence and trauma. According to Gilmartin, these perceived demands evolve throughout an officer's career. What initially attracts officers to policing—adrenaline rushes and camaraderie—can eventually become sources of overwhelming stress.

In Gilmartin’s “Special Case” of policing stress, he explains how hypervigilance, while necessary for the job, can become a significant burden. Officers may perceive constant danger, requiring them to always be alert. Over time, this hypervigilance results in emotional fatigue and detachment in personal life, particularly within family interactions. This “biological roller-coaster” leads to alternating periods of intense on-duty alertness and off-duty emotional detachment, presenting both actual and perceived demands on the officer’s well-being.

1. **Identify people’s actual and perceived capabilities in this situation:**



**Stage 1: Perceived Demand and Capability** During this stage, a demand is placed on the individual, which can come from the external environment (physical or social) or be self-imposed. The individual assesses their actual capability to meet the demand. Factors such as past experiences, self-perception, and beliefs about personal influence affect how demands and capabilities are perceived. This stage results in the individual’s perception of both the demand and their capability.

**Stage 2: Cognitive Comparison** In this stage, the individual weighs their perceptions of demand and capability through a process of cognitive comparison. If perceived demands outweigh perceived capabilities, stress is activated. Conversely, if perceived demands equal or fall below perceived capabilities, the individual either experiences no stress or stress from underload, respectively. The imbalance in favor of demands activates stress, which the leader must consider.

**Stage 3: Stress Activation** The activation of stress occurs here, and it can be functional or dysfunctional depending on the degree of imbalance. A moderate gap between perceived demands and capabilities results in functional stress, which can motivate and enhance performance. However, a large gap triggers dysfunctional stress, which hampers performance and leads to feelings of being overwhelmed. Dysfunctional stress may also push the individual into prolonged resistance or exhaustion.

**Stage 4: Stress Response Systems** In response to stress, various systems in the body may become involved. Physiological responses include sweating or increased heart rate, while psychological responses may take the form of emotions like fear or anger, as well as coping or defensive mechanisms. Additionally, observable behavioral responses such as studying (coping behavior) or avoiding stress (avoidance behavior) may occur.

**Stage 5: Feedback and Future Stress Situations** In this final stage, the outcomes of stress responses feed back into the individual’s perception of demands and capabilities. Successful stress management can increase actual and perceived capabilities, while failure or avoidance might negatively impact them. Feedback loops help individuals learn from past experiences, improving their ability to handle future stress

Officers possess actual capabilities such as physical training, legal knowledge, procedural skills, and mental toughness, all of which equip them to handle stressful and dangerous situations. However, their perceived capabilities often fluctuate as they confront their work's emotional and psychological toll. Officers may feel that they must handle all challenges independently, cope without help, and avoid showing vulnerability.

Gilmartin describes how, over time, the stress reaction—the "brotherhood of biochemistry"—leads officers to become emotionally over-invested in their roles. This emotional over-attachment distorts their perception of their personal capabilities. For instance, while an officer may be highly competent in controlling situations on the job, they may struggle to manage the emotional toll in their personal life. This perceived inadequacy, particularly in balancing work and family life, can impair their overall sense of competence and lead to emotional withdrawal.

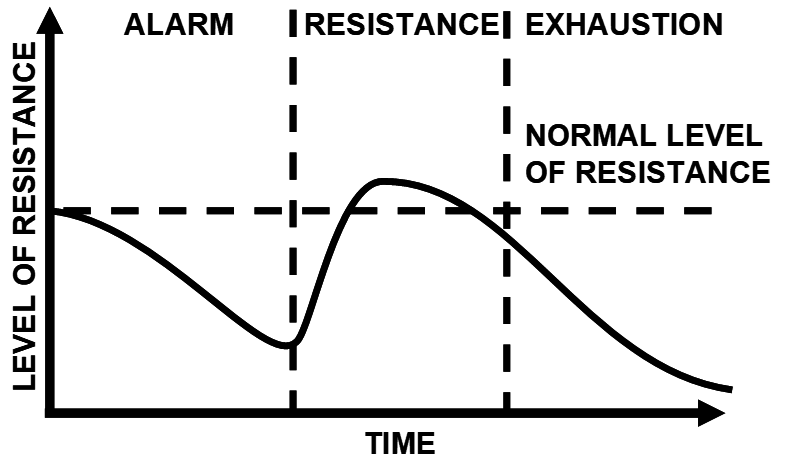
**C. Identify the stress responses evident in this situation:**

Stress responses in policing include both physiological and psychological reactions. Physiological responses often involve increased heart rate, sweating, hypervigilance, and exhaustion. Gilmartin explains how the body’s autonomic nervous system triggers the fight-or-flight response necessary for survival on duty. However, this heightened state of alertness can result in emotional burnout once the officer is off-duty, manifesting in apathy, emotional detachment, and numbness.

Psychologically, officers may experience irritability, frustration, anxiety, and depression. Gilmartin’s work explains that the hypervigilance associated with the job can create a “biological roller-coaster,” where officers are highly alert and engaged while on duty but emotionally withdrawn and apathetic at home. This pattern often strains personal relationships, particularly with spouses and children, as officers become emotionally disconnected outside of work.

Behavioral responses to stress may include avoidance, emotional withdrawal, anger, and the use of unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as substance abuse or compulsive behaviors (e.g., gambling). Gilmartin emphasizes that officers often isolate themselves socially, limiting their interactions to fellow officers who understand the job, which deepens the emotional detachment from family and non-police friends.

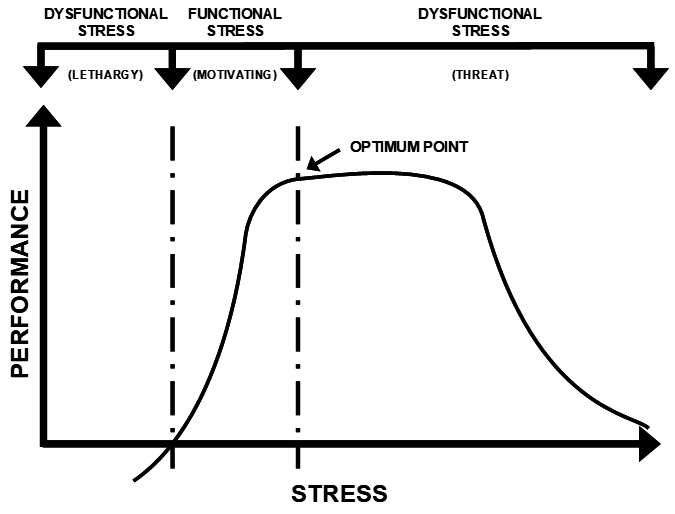
**Classify the stress responses, indicating which are the results of the demands placed on the individual and which are attributable to a lack of individual capability:**



Stress responses such as hypervigilance, emotional detachment, and exhaustion are directly tied to the demands placed on officers by the nature of their work. The constant requirement to remain alert and prepared for life-or-death situations makes it difficult for officers to relax or “turn off” when off duty. This inability to disengage is a direct result of the demands of the policing profession.

However, some stressors, like social withdrawal, family conflicts, and substance abuse, may be attributable to a perceived lack of capability to handle the emotional and psychological toll of the job. Gilmartin points out that officers often fail to develop healthy coping strategies to manage stress, and over time, this leads to a sense of helplessness and emotional vulnerability. They struggle to control their personal lives because they have over-invested in their professional role, a phenomenon Gilmartin describes as an emotional over-attachment to their identity as police officers.

**III. How Perception of Demands and Capabilities Results in Stress:**



Certain stress responses, such as hypervigilance, emotional detachment, and exhaustion, are the direct results of the demands placed on officers by the nature of their work. The requirement to remain alert and ready for life-or-death situations makes it difficult for officers to relax or disengage when off-duty. This inability to “turn off” is a result of the demands of policing.

However, other stress responses, such as social withdrawal, family conflict, and substance abuse, may be attributable to a perceived lack of individual capability to handle the emotional and psychological toll of the job. Gilmartin notes that officers often fail to develop healthy coping strategies for managing stress, which can lead to feelings of helplessness and emotional vulnerability. This struggle to maintain balance between their professional and personal lives is exacerbated by the emotional over-investment in their identity as police officers.

**IV. Select an Appropriate Theoretical Leader Strategy to Address Areas of Interest:**

A leader can apply Transformational Leadership combined with Emotional Intelligence (EI) to address the stressors facing officers. Transformational leaders inspire and motivate their team members to transcend personal challenges, while Emotional Intelligence helps leaders manage their own emotions and those of their followers. By focusing on building trust, promoting psychological safety, and developing emotional resilience, leaders can better manage stress within their teams.

Kevin Gilmartin’s recommendations for emotional survival in policing align well with these leadership strategies. He advocates for officers to take control of their personal lives through proactive planning, physical exercise, and developing hobbies or roles outside of the police identity. Leaders can integrate these principles into their approach by encouraging officers to build personal resilience and balance their work and home lives.

**V. Apply the Theoretical Leader Strategy in the form of a Leader Plan:**

**Leader Plan:**

1. Promote Psychological Safety: Leaders should foster an open environment where officers can discuss their stressors without fear of judgment. Supervisors can organize regular wellness check-ins and workshops on stress management, integrating Gilmartin’s insights on hypervigilance and emotional burnout.
2. Gradual Adjustment of Demands: Leaders can introduce changes incrementally instead of overwhelming officers with high-stakes responsibilities. Gilmartin emphasizes that officers often become overwhelmed when they feel out of control. Leaders can address this by gradually increasing job demands and communicating expectations.
3. Emphasize Personal and Emotional Resilience: Implement regular training programs on emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and emotional regulation techniques. Gilmartin’s work highlights the importance of physical fitness in managing the emotional toll of policing. Leaders should encourage officers to exercise regularly to mitigate the effects of the biological roller coaster.
4. Develop Strong Peer Support Systems: Gilmartin notes that officers often rely on the camaraderie of fellow cops. Leaders should formalize peer support programs that allow officers to share their experiences and discuss coping strategies in a structured, healthy way, reducing reliance on unhealthy venting through "war stories."
5. Encourage Work-Life Balance: Leaders can help officers build more balanced lives by promoting hobbies, encouraging vacations, and supporting family activities. Gilmartin suggests using a master calendar to plan regular family and personal activities that give officers control over their off-duty time. This can help them break the cycle of emotional detachment at home.
6. Provide Continuous Feedback and Recognition: Leaders should establish regular feedback loops that focus on individual strengths, areas for improvement, and stress management. Recognizing officers’ successes and providing constructive feedback can boost their confidence and help mitigate the stress caused by perceived capability gaps.

This strategic plan can mitigate stressors, improve officers’ perceived capabilities, and create a healthier, more balanced organizational culture by applying transformational leadership and emotional intelligence and integrating Gilmartin's recommendations on managing the biological roller coaster.

**The Stress of Policing: A Special Case**

Gilmartin, K. M. (1990). The brotherhood of biochemistry: Its implications for a police career. In H. E. Russell & A. Beigel (Eds.), Understanding human behavior for effective police work (3rd ed.). Basic Books. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

As the field of behavioral sciences has grown over the past decades, significant attention has been given to the study of the stressful effects of life as law enforcement officers. The main theme of these studies concerning police stress revolves around two major approaches. The first approach points out the stress reaction and its potential long-term effects. This involves educating police officers about the stress reaction and revolves around Hans Seyle’s concept of the general adaptation syndrome (GAS; the physiological processes through which the body attempts to adapt to ever-changing challenges). The second major approach in teaching law enforcement officers about stress is to present a list of potential stressors or events that precipitate the stress reaction. This list usually becomes somewhat of a litany of the daily negative events that officers are exposed to, such as the inhumanity of man toward his fellow man, the inefficiencies of the criminal justice system, sedentary lifestyle, poor nutritional habits, and so on. While this information is indeed valuable, it appears to miss the major concept of the stress reaction for law enforcement officers. It points out stress as a negative event to be avoided. But in reality, most officers find that in the beginning years of their career, experiencing this stress reaction in mild dosages makes the career exciting and very attractive.

If you asked a large number of law enforcement officers why they stayed with their career, you would probably hear such answers as “Cop work gets in your blood.” “It’s exciting and a different thing to do each day.” “I couldn’t stand just working behind a desk,” and so on. However, what attracts law enforcement applicants and young cops to the job in the first half of a police career may be their undoing when the novelty has worn off. When police officers state that “cop work gets in your blood,” they may unknowingly be describing a very potent physiological change that all police officers experience when first approaching their job. This physiological change appears to be so entrenched in the police role that it might be impossible to separate this physiological change from the role itself. It has been said that police work creates a brotherhood. Today, this brotherhood is not exclusively a male domain; it is a closed social unit that extends membership only to other cops. Cops may not understand the procedures, equipment, or geographical terrain in which other officers perform their duties, but they certainly understand the physiological sensations involved in the job. For example, a cop from Maine and a cop from California accidentally meet at O’Hare Airport and start sharing experiences and telling “war stories.” Each officer might have difficulties visualizing the external events taking place in the narrative told by the other (the setting, temperature, type of community the call took place in, and so on), but he or she would have no difficulty understanding the “internal environment” of the call: how it felt to work that particular call—the physiology of the call. The brotherhood of police is actually a “brotherhood of biochemistry.” Cops understand how other cops feel in similar situations because “they’ve been there.” They’ve experienced similar physiological sensations, and they’ve made critical decisions in these physiological states. The physiological sensations cops experience on the street are characteristic of the stress reaction. Without these sensations, police work would not be as attractive to young cops. In fact, they might find it boring and mundane.

**Hypervigilance**

Consider how the police role is developed in young cops. It begins with the manner in which law enforcement officers are required to view the world. If you take cops in Anytown, USA, and put them behind the wheel of a patrol unit, they are required to view the streets and the community from a different perspective than citizen drivers. Cops realize that “I better pay attention out here! I could get my butt kicked or get somebody else, or myself killed if I’m not paying attention!” This reality forces young officers to view the world differently from civilians. When viewing the world while in this new work role, officers experience a new physiological sensation, an increase in alertness, and an increased sensation of energy and aliveness; this new perceptual style goes beyond just “paying attention.” It includes looking at and watching sections of the community that other people would ignore or consider neutral. In the interest of their own safety, officers have to view all encounters as potentially lethal. This newfound perceptual style, with its emphasis on officer safety, carries with it a parallel physiological and psychological state. As mentioned previously, young officers feel increased sensations of energy, aliveness, and alertness. They find themselves becoming quick-witted in the presence of fellow street cops. Friendships develop quickly, and camaraderie is intensified among people with whom they share potential jeopardy. During the developmental years, young officers experience the physiological stress reaction firsthand, but it is not seen as a negative reaction. On duty, the associated sensation of physiological intensity is viewed as pleasant and enjoyable. They find their job so attractive that leaving at the end of a shift is difficult. What is unwittingly taking place is that young officers are developing an on-duty style of hypervigilance. This style, though necessary for the survival of law enforcement officers, often leads to the long-term destruction of an effective personal life. Officers go on duty, experience increased energy, alertness, quick-wittedness, and camaraderie, and enjoy their tour. However, for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Officers who experience an on-duty physiological “high” find that when they get off duty and return home, this hypervigilant reaction stops, as they literally plunge into the opposite reactions of detachment, exhaustion, apathy, and isolation. Thus, officers experience the police stress reaction, an emotional ride on a biological roller coaster.

The “biological” roller coaster describes the extreme psycho-physiological swings that police officers experience on a daily basis. One can assume that average citizens live on a more even keel, but police officers are denied this stability. Because of the degree of emotional intensity of law enforcement, the increased sensations of alertness required while on duty, followed by reactions of an equal magnitude in the opposite directions while off duty, the police officer’s life is characterized by the extremes of highs and lows. This pendulum-like swing occurs daily. Going to work initiates an increased sensation of involvement, energy, and alertness; coming home, a sensation of apathy, detachment, and boredom. The biological reason this roller coaster takes place lies in the autonomic nervous system that controls all the body’s automatic processes: heart rate, blood pressure, body temperature, and so on. The autonomic nervous system has two branches that act in tandem. The sympathetic branch alerts the body to potentially intense situations, causing increased alertness, awareness, and the “fight or flight reaction” (like taking a bunch of “uppers”). The Parasympathetic branch controls the body’s quiescent or peaceful counter-reactions (like a bunch of “downers”). This biological roller coaster cycles daily for young officers in the first years of their careers as they polish their police skills. It produces high-activity, highly involved police officers, but leaves them with under-involved, apathetic personal lives. It can be said in no uncertain terms that the first victims of this biological roller coaster are not the officers themselves but their families. The officers alternate between being “Heat Seekers” at work, where the more intense the call, the more they’re drawn to it, and being “couch potatoes” at home. Once the police role is unplugged, there remains only a listless detachment from anything related to personal life.

Interviewing police spouses during the first decade of an officer's career can easily document the “couch potato” phase of the biological roller coaster. Although the faces and names change, the stories remain almost identical.

“She’s different now that she’s a cop. We used to do so many things together, but now she is off duty, and I can’t even speak to her.”

“He comes home from work, collapses on the couch, and turns on the television set. I can talk to him for five minutes, and he doesn’t even hear me.”

“You know, we drove 150 miles last weekend to go visit my mom and dad. I don’t think she said two words to me on the whole trip.”

“We walk through the mall on his days off, and he barely grunts to me, but then he sees two or three of his buddies working off-duty, and you can’t shut him up. ‘Hey, what happened last night? Did you guys arrest that asshole? I heard you come up on the air.’”

As officers begin experiencing the biological roller-coaster ride, they begin heavily investing in the police role. Their family and personal relationships become thin, frazzled, and very fragile. The police spouse laments, “I don’t know how much longer I can keep this family together. He comes home angry every night: ‘Everybody on earth is an asshole.’”

“I swear she’d rather be at work than at home. She starts getting ready for work two hours before she has to be there. Sometimes, I think she’s married to the job and not to me.”

The police family begins reverberating with this biological roller coaster. Police officers’ lifestyles change drastically. These elevated sensations while on duty are necessary. Officers do not have the luxury of viewing the world as primarily peaceful and benign. Officers’ very existence depends on their being able to perceive situations from the perceptual set of hypervigilance. They must interpret aspects of their environment as potentially lethal, which other members of society see as unimportant. Without hypervigilance, police officers would be seen as “not good cops.” However, the tragedy is that while law enforcement officers are trained to react during the upper phase of the biological roller coaster, there has been very little training done or education provided on how to adapt to or avoid the pitfalls of the bottom half of the ride. In the first decade of a police career, the valleys of the roller-coaster ride destroy the emotional support systems and the family support systems, systems that will become increasingly important if officers are to survive the second half of a police career.

Name:

**Complete a Student Journal entry** for Stress and Stress Management.

Think about a police work group of which you have been either a member or a leader. Describe a situation where a group member experienced dysfunctional stress. What demands piled up for the stressed-out group member? What capabilities did this person lack that might have helped the situation? How did he or she react to the stress? What actions did his or her peers or leaders attempt in trying to help this individual? In retrospect, what else might have been tried to help this person?

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