

Stress of the Job

There's a cost to any business. For professional law enforcement officers, military personnel, or Federal agents the cost is wear on tear their body from the years of cumulative stress. There is a relatively recent hypothesis that asserts that there is physiological risk associated with exposure to psychosocial stressors over time. In lay speak, folks in high stress jobs will suffer physical ailments because of the pressures of the job.

The term for the chronic exposure to stress and its effect on the body is referred to as the allostatic load. This term was coined by McEwan and Stellar in their 1993 text entitled "Health Psychology" published by McGraw-Hill. Allostasis could be literally defined as "maintaining stability through change." From an NIA Exploratory Workshop on Allostatic Load in 2007:

"Allostatic load refers to the cumulative biological wear and tear that can result from excessive cycles of response (i.e. too frequent and/or of inappropriate duration or scope) in these systems as they seek to maintain allostasis in the face of environmental challenge [someone assaulting you]. According to the theory, as these systems become taxed and dysregulated, they begin to exhibit imbalances in the primary neural mediators of the stress response..."

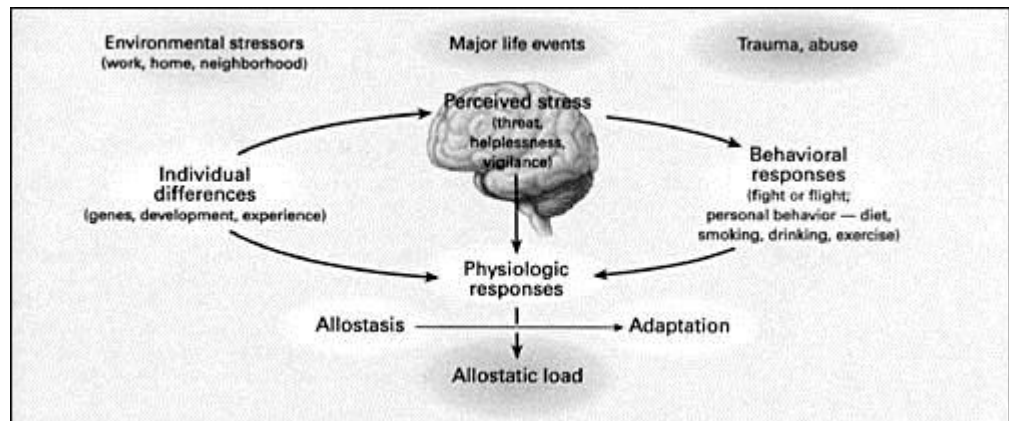
Stressful situations can limit brain functions to basic levels, the much discussed "fight or flight" response. Allostatic load is impacted by repeated cycles of this response. Over time the allostatic load can cause changes in the physiological response to stressors. The police officer who once responded within a moral and ethical framework may begin responding with inappropriately high levels of anxiety and aggression.

Obviously, the implications for the theory is that there are long-term health consequences to having a job with an unusually high allostatic load. The stress of the job can kill you. It's worth understanding the threat and how to mitigate it for the same reasons you practice with firearms. From a 2005 UCLA study:

"The body's perception of stress leads to a significant load upon physiological regulation including circadian regulation, sleep and psycho neuroendocrine-immune [link between psychological factors and the nervous and immune systems] interaction."

Besides a physical toll, there is a psychological toll to this phenomenon as well. It is well documented phenomenon that acute stressors can cause PTSD in soldiers, law enforcement, or other victims of traumatic events. The frontal executive areas of the brain are responsible for planning, decision making, and judgement. This area is affected by the experiences that pass through it. The frontal areas of the brain are constantly “tuned” by experience. When two cells fire together, they are wired together.

In a recent FBI study entitled *Brain Functioning as the Ground for Spiritual Experiences and Ethical Behavior* a veteran law enforcement officer commented “Peace



officers are exposed to the worst that life has to offer. They see the denizens of society at their very worst – when they have just been victimized or when they have just victimized someone else. Peace officers see the perpetrators of evil and the results of their evil deeds. The constant contact with evil is corrosive, and those effects are cumulative.”

The author (Dr. Fred Travis) further writes that “Experiences change the brain. This is inevitable. The violence law enforcement officers see becomes part of the functioning of their brains and bodies. Neural imaging assessed activation of the areas of the brain that stop wrong behavior, called orbitofrontal cortex, after individuals...” witness or experience violent, traumatic events.

Allostatic load can reduce connections with frontal executive areas of the brain and amplify stimulus-response circuits. These changes, or structural remodeling, can impact memory and emotions and may increase anxiety and aggression. Victims of these changes may become distant from spouses, children, or other friends because they are emotionally incapable of interacting or feel a sense of detachment. Neural imaging of patients who experience high allostatic load reveal lesions on the frontal executive areas. The brain is intact, but the brain matter is no longer involved in planning and decision making.

The impact on job performance can be devastating. Extreme errors in judgement, non-ethical or immoral decision making, and dereliction of responsibilities can all result from years of high stress and allostatic overload.

How then, do we combat allostatic load? There are, of course, many prescription drugs available that can help mitigate the effects of allostatic load. Somewhat surprising, at

least to me, is another non-pharmaceutical option. The solution may well be spirituality. Spirituality, loosely defined as a sense of wholeness, has been shown to engage the entire frontal executive area of the brain.

Spirituality can obviously be religious. The research conducted by Dr. Travis, however, is more general. Any experiences that are universal in nature, or ones that transcend our own sense of time, space, or individual body can be spiritual. The effects of spirituality on the brain are widespread activation and higher brainwave coherence. The measure of this phenomenon is known as Brain Integration Scale (BIS).

People who regularly practice spirituality have a correspondingly higher BIS. They become more self-reliant, self-sufficient, independent, and take responsibility for their lives and performance. BIS studies have shown a positive correlation between spirituality and emotional stability and moral reasoning, while showing a negative correlation with anxiety. BIS is increased with regular spiritual experiences.

For professional soldiers and police, the conclusions are fairly straightforward. Each of you will react differently to the stress of your jobs. Over time, the cumulative stress *may* negatively impact your physical and/or psychological health. An otherwise good, moral officer will make immoral choices and could become extremely anxious or aggressive.

For me, there is a certain elegance to the allostatic load theory. Becoming involved in your local church and establishing a healthy relationship with God will help you reach your potential as a husband, a father, and law enforcement professional. This foundational relationship will help you manage allostatic load and facilitate success both at home and at work. It provides balance to your life and will allow you to formulate the best decisions, even when under extreme stress.

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