



By Dr. Mike Dwyer\*

# STRESSORS

**O**CCUPATIONAL stress has been put forward as 'the epidemic of the 80s'. Actually it is as old as human history.

Euripides wrote in 450BC of man who 'strives against the stress of necessity'. What Euripides was saying was that we strain against the stress of that which seems inevitable or unpalatable.

In this sense, he had the terms the right way around. In engineering terms, stress is the force applied and strain is the result. In psychological terms, a corruption has occurred, where stress has become the result, and a new term — stressor — has had to be invented to represent the force applied.

What is unfortunate is that stress is being taken up by behavioural scientists as if it has appeared only with the nuclear age. Clinical physicians on the other hand, are realising that people are no more anxious now than they were at any time in human history. The stressor for a peasant in the Middle Ages might have been the threat of Genghis Khan's hordes appearing over the hill at any moment. Today, one may feel severe strain through not being able to afford a house in keeping with a recent promotion. In the eyes of physicians, job stress is a current popular phenomenon. Two years ago, Repetitive Strain Injury came into vogue, and is now on the wane. Twenty-five years ago, Workers' Compensation Hernia reached epidemic proportions, whereas now the condition is rarely brought to a doctor's notice.

Don't misunderstand — I'm not saying the condition is imagined, or dreamed up. I'm saying that because it is the current vogue, it is being talked about too much by too many so-called 'experts', and many inaccurate statements are being made.

The fact is there is not much hard evidence linking stress with physical disease. However, this is not to say that stress cannot become a totally disabling condition. When this happens, the disablement only recovers when either the stimulus is removed, or the subject adapts.

Occupational stress can be defined as a conscious feeling of unease arising as a result of a condition, or conditions, of work. It is a non-specific response of the body to any demand placed upon it.

Acute stress equates with what some authorities call physiological stress. There is an actual definable threat in the immediate environment, and this involves the physiological response known as the 'fight or flight' mechanism.

The occasional periods of peak performance demanded of police officers can be likened to those of actors, where there

is a similar concentration on a single short period of intense physical and mental effort. This often takes place late in the afternoon or evening, when the human body is fatigued, and, in normal circumstances, getting ready for bed. Such intense activity, it stands to reason, can be followed by difficulty in sleeping and in eating habits, and dietary control becomes difficult.

Peak stress occurs at the start of a performance. Pulse rate monitoring in actors often produces readings of 160 per minute at the moment of going on stage. The sense of unease is due to changes in certain hormone levels, mainly adrenaline and cortisone, brought about by the 'fight or flight' mechanism, hence the onset of the physical appearance of anxiety.

Among the manifestations are:

- Contraction of facial muscles — the 'worried frown';
- pallor;
- sweating;
- rapid pulse;
- increase respiratory rate; and
- tremor.

These lead to a sense of weakness, or even fainting, followed by a recovery rebound. Chronic stress equates more with the term psychological stress, and the changes in hormone patterns such as adrenaline and cortisone are not nearly as predictable.

Chronic stress is characterised by:

- Ambiguous source;
- not immediately resolvable;
- a perceived threat to well-being;
- long term; and
- no recovery rebound.

What happens is that the body's reactions are constantly elevated as if to respond to an, as yet unidentifiable, emergency. The signs and symptoms are at least some of the following:

- Unease, and a sense of impending doom;
- poor sleep pattern;
- irritability and aggression;
- weight and appetite changes;
- mood swings;
- poor concentration and thus poor performance;
- increased sick leave; and
- increase use of drugs and alcohol.

Stressors capable of producing these 'fight or flight' symptoms include:

- Demands to do well in your job, either from superiors or peer group;
- expectations of your family;
- meeting deadlines;
- modern lifestyles, e.g. traffic jams, noise, nagging;
- financial worries;
- inability to identify achievement;
- ill health of a family member; and
- unhappy marriage.

This is by no means an expansive list. Some psychologists have produced lists and allotted points for various stressors. They suggest that if your points score exceeds a certain number you are undergoing stress.

I don't totally agree with this concept. We all react differently to different stressors. Sometimes, if a new stressor comes along, it replaces others at least temporarily, rather than becomes cumulative.

There is a concept that all stress is basically occupational and that the only variable is role. But whether we consider the role of the police officer, citizen, son or daughter, husband or wife, or group member makes very little difference. All these roles require training to produce adequate responses.

Police training should be designed to produce a thoughtful individual, so well versed in both life skills and professional skills that it is almost impossible to create a situation that is beyond that individual's power to react adequately. That is a very tall order, but I would hazard a guess that no civil organisation would come within a bull's roar of the police training system.

The most you are likely to get in the business world is a business management course following a basic university degree. I doubt that any business concern would be prepared to train personnel for every operational level.

The generalisation I'm trying to make is that there should be less chance of reaching your so-called 'incompetence level' in a police situation. In effect, police tend not to be as easily stressed in a professional respect, due to this concept of having been prepared for most eventualities.

Thus, training is the most important tool in a program of stress management.

In reality, we are our own severest critics. It does not help our ego to receive praise when we know it was undeserved. Neither does it basically upset us so much to receive criticism if we know our effort was total and well applied.

A corollary of this is that as you grow older, you realise that it is never possible all through life to like what you do — the real satisfaction only comes from being good at it.

### **Broadening of Interests**

Many police officers have a total and unabiding commitment to their profession. While this may be laudable from a narrow organisational point of view, it does have the effect of making that person very vulnerable to stress. If performance or skills as a police officer come under attack, the fact that there are no interests outside of the police mean that the whole lifestyle is threatened.

A broader base of interests enables a

person to place such threats in proper perspective.

### **Nutrition and Diet**

It has long been recognised that what you eat and drink makes a difference. This difference is often related to the blood sugar level which adversely affects the body's ability to conserve energy. The effect of caffeine is accentuated if it is taken, for example, early in the morning in the absence of a proper breakfast.

A good diet consists of vegetables, fruits, whole wheat breads and grains, potatoes, beans, lean meat, fish, poultry and low fat dairy products. A diet like this is high in nutrients and low in fat, sugar, salt and cholesterol.

The role of exercise in stress management is an important one but the nature of the exercise also requires attention. It is important that the particular activity you choose should be one that you enjoy. For example, a person who chooses jogging as an exercise to get fit and deal with stress but does not like running, has chosen an inappropriate activity. Certainly, the level of fitness will increase, but at the same time additional stressors may be created by doing something you don't enjoy.

Additionally, your attitude towards the activity may reduce its benefits. If you choose to play a game like squash, and are highly competitive in your approach to the game, then you may well find that the mistakes you make or the fact that you lose, become a source of stress in themselves.

It is important that any activity you choose should result in a sense of satisfaction and relaxation. Physical fitness is not a panacea and should be used only as one element of an overall stress management program.

### **Relaxation and Meditation**

Relaxation has long been regarded as an important way of coping with stress but it is one that has been slow to receive favour from police officers. The benefits are immediate and it can be practised in a variety of circumstances or situations. The effect is based on the fact that a state of total relaxation necessarily precludes the presence of any stress reactions.

Unfortunately, many people have lost the ability to relax easily and consequently must re-learn 'relaxation'. Meditation has the same effect as relaxation and for most people must also be learned.

Most officers probably will have noticed how, after a particular exciting arrest or car chase, those involved seem to want to talk at length about what happened. This is known as verbal ventilation. What is happening is that it is helping those people involved in the incident to cope with the effects of stress. It is

normal and should be encouraged by supervisors.

In a demonstration situation which is proving rather stressful, police officers might well find it helpful to talk not only between themselves, but also to demonstrators, if it can be done without worsening the situation. Failure to 'verbally ventilate' may result in a physical ventilation, perhaps in the form of an assault.

The appropriate use of humour can have a powerful effect in reducing tension, often for both sides, in a given situation. Not all people have a quick and ready sense of humour but those who do should use this gift as a way of reducing stress. Its effectiveness can sometimes be seen in macabre jokes that police officers tell when dealing with particularly unpleasant situations such as deaths.

### **Smoking**

While the act of smoking is itself a stressor in the sense that it increases the heart rate and provokes various other bodily reactions associated with stress, it is at the same time psychologically relaxing. An increase in smoking takes place, for example, in the control room when the controllers are suddenly faced with handling a particularly serious incident.

A supervisor should consider very seriously the stress that would be created by denying people the opportunity to smoke in these circumstances.

### **Alcohol**

The informal get-together with a chat over a glass of beer after an incident is common in the force. As a mechanism in dealing with stress, the consumption of alcohol is a two-edged sword. Where the main reason in gathering in the bar is social intercourse, and the consumption of alcohol is incidental to this, then that time spent with friends may have a positive effect in dealing with your stress. However, where the alcohol becomes the main point of the gathering, then it is playing an inappropriate and dangerous role.

There are a variety of other strategies that can become a part of your program for dealing with stress. These include counselling, temporary mild sedation and time management.

But above all, the two most important means of combatting psycho-neuroses — and after all, that is essential what stress is — are training and man management.

Man management can be almost summed up in the old Christian concept of dealing with others as you would like to be dealt with yourself. It will be the subject of a further article in the next issue.

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