



**NEW MEXICO
LAW ENFORCEMENT ACADEMY**

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Stress Management (NM240019)
New Mexico Law Enforcement Academy
Annual In-Service Training Curriculum 2024

Lesson Plan / Instructor Guide

COURSE TITLE: Stress Management

TERMINAL GOAL: The student will learn what stress is, how it affects them, and why it is important to manage it.

ENABLING OBJECTIVES:

Upon completion of this course, the participants will be able to:

1. Identify the definition of stress and the effects it has on the body
2. Identify the categories of law enforcement stressors
3. List different ways they might be able to manage their stress
4. Identify the facts related to police suicide

INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS:

Classroom lecture, handouts, and visual aids (PowerPoint presentation)

HANDOUTS:

N/A

COURSE DURATION:

1 Hour

CURRICULUM REFERENCES:

1. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/stress>
2. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2022/06/10/high-suicide-rate-police-firefighters-mental-health/7470846001/>
3. <https://portal.cops.usdoj.gov/resourcecenter/content.ashx/cops-p429-pub.pdf>

EQUIPMENT, PERSONNEL, AND SUPPLIES NEEDED:

COMPUTER, AUDIO, AND VISUAL AIDS; WHITEBOARD

TARGET AUDIENCE:

NEW MEXICO LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS – CADETS / RECRUITS

INSTRUCTOR RATIO:

1 / 50

EVALUATION STRATEGY: Students will be tasked with developing a plan to cope with the stress they currently have in their life.

AUTHOR & ORIGINATION DATE:

SOUTHWEST TRAINING CONSULTANTS LLC JUNE 2023

REVISION / REVIEW DATE(S):

REVISED / REVIEWED BY:

This course is designed to identify what stress is and how it plays a role in our lives. In turn, how it plays a role in the lives around us. When giving this block of instruction your focus needs to be on how each and every one of us needs to take responsibility for our actions and how those actions are dictated by how we respond to stress. If someone is having a bad day, what started that? How does having a bad day turn into making poor decisions? In most cases, our thoughts are somewhere else. At some point in your career, a supervisor told you that if you are having a bad day, find something to do where you will not have contact with the public. This was done to keep you out of trouble. Please focus on the positive of staying healthy and reducing stress to the best of your ability.

**When starting this class, ask the students to write down what causes them stress. Have them keep it to themselves. Then ask the class to identify some things that cause them stress. Our goal is to start a conversation but allow the student to identify the stressors they feel comfortable sharing. Let them know they will need the list for later.

Don't forget, always start the class with a positive. This will be a good class. You will get something out of it.

A. Stress

a. You have been an officer for several years now. You are getting ready to start your shift. It is a Monday for you, and like every other Monday, it starts with a list of things that need to get done. As you are heading into the station, you are called by your supervisor, who wants to let you know a complaint came in about a traffic stop you conducted last week. You don't recall the stop immediately but are assured it will not be a big deal. As you continue towards the station, you are thinking about the interview for the transfer to a different division within the department. You applied a few weeks ago, and notice should be made sometime this morning as to whom was selected. Once at the station, you find your inbox is full of stuff. One item, in particular, stands out as it is from command. You are being tasked with an escort that will take place tomorrow. You realize you have court at the same time and need to figure this out. After being at the office for about twenty minutes, you learn you were not selected for the transfer. Stress is an amazing thing, and we put ourselves through so much of it each and every day. You go from being excited about the possibility of a new position to worrying about what will happen with the complaint to disappointment when you are not given the position. This does not even cover the things going on at home.

b. You probably don't think about it very often, but stress is a part of our everyday lives. There is good and bad stress, and we predominately focus on the bad stuff. The problem here is as a law enforcement officer, you surround yourself with it. The bigger issue is how you deal with it and what coping mechanisms you use to reduce your stress. We all want to do a good job and be the best; the problem is the cost. You may not see it initially, but it will catch up to you and get you when you least expect it. So, the challenge is heading it off before it becomes an issue.

c. As we go through this block of instruction, we will talk about what stress is and how it can take a toll on the body. What the different stressors are that a law enforcement officer will deal with. We will talk about coping mechanisms. We will also go over statistics related to suicide in the profession. Everything we discuss in today's block of instruction is intended to help you identify how to reduce your stress and live a fuller life. Our goal is to see to it that you make it to retirement and beyond, as there are many things out there you have not experienced in life.

B. What is stress, and how does it affect the body?

a. Stress is your body's response to change. It's a very individual thing. A situation that one person finds stressful may not bother someone else.

b. Stress generally refers to two things: the psychological perception of pressure, on the one hand, and the body's response to it, on the other, which involves multiple systems, from metabolism to muscles to memory. Some stress is necessary for all living systems; it is the means by which they encounter and respond to the challenges and uncertainties of existence. The perception of danger sets off an automatic response system, known as the fight-or-flight response, that, activated through hormonal signals, prepares an animal to meet a threat or to flee from it. (1)

c. Stress is your body's response to change. It's a very individual thing. A situation that one person finds stressful may not bother someone else.

- i. For example, one person may become tense when driving; another person may find driving a source of relaxation and joy. Something that causes fear in some people, such as rock climbing, may be fun for others.
 - d. Stress can lead to changes in many different parts of the body. Stress can lead to a faster heartbeat, muscle tension, and gastrointestinal issues. It can lead to heavier and faster breathing, which can strain the lungs and blunt the immune system’s ability to respond to threats. (1)
 - e. Ongoing stress assaults the immune system, making us more vulnerable to disease. Although stress hormones ready the body for emergencies, they also depress the immune system by decreasing inflammation and decreasing white blood cell production. Stress may therefore contribute to illnesses such as heart disease, cancer, and others. (1)
 - f. Stress hormones, such as cortisol, are naturally produced every day so that people can take on the challenges ahead. But marinating in high levels of stress hormones over time can prompt the brain to function differently, leading to memory impairment, cognitive problems, anxiety, or depression. (1)

For the next section, you will focus on the things that cause stress for an officer. Do your best at keeping the conversation focused on how that stressor makes them feel rather than spending time bashing a policy or supervisor. We know the problem, what is the solution. We will get to that in the next section.

There is also a piece in here about qualified immunity. The best way to describe this is when you are standing in a rain storm, and you pull out your umbrella. The rain is all the things that come at you. The umbrella protects you, the law, policy, and procedure. Stay under the umbrella and everything will be all right. If you do what you were trained to do and stay within the scope of the law this will not be an issue.

- C. Categories of law enforcement stressors
 - a. Those related to the law enforcement organization
 - i. Supervisors and administrative rules
 - 1. This can be a variety of things, from poor supervision and micromanagement to some of the mundane rules implemented.
 - ii. Peer relationships
 - 1. Some relationships flourish, and other times you don’t mesh with your shift partner.
 - iii. Direct reports (subordinates)
 - 1. Every now and then, you get a subordinate that needs to be fixed. No matter what you do to assist them, more is needed.
 - b. Those related to law enforcement work
 - i. Constant civil liability
 - 1. The fear of being sued in most cases is enough, but then qualified immunity was pulled, and there was a greater fear that one might lose everything. This by itself has created stress. Please note if you do your job correctly, it will be fine.
 - ii. Impending danger

- 1. Every call you go on has the potential to be significant.
- iii. Dealing with present or past trauma
 - 1. The reality is there are things you have seen that you cannot unsee. This one is a lot more significant than we give it credit, as in a lot of cases, we do not deal with the trauma experienced and just let it fester.
- c. Those that stem from interaction with the criminal justice system and the general public
 - i. Public expectations
 - 1. Things are getting a little better now, but a few years ago, this was an area of extreme frustration and caused a lot of stress.
- d. Those related to the individual officer's personal life and approach to stressful events
 - 1. We don't often think about this as much because our focus has been on work. This generation is changing that, and more focus is being put on family. The issue is there are a lot of things in our personal lives that we hide or don't talk about for fear of being seen a certain way.
 - ii. Coping strategies
 - 1. We do not have working coping skills, and it is causing stress. You either don't work on it, or you just do not know how to cope.
 - iii. Relationship issues
 - 1. This is a big one as well. Your partner needs your attention, and how you provide that or don't can affect the relationship. It is a constant balancing act, and sometimes we sway, an argument will happen, and the balance is off. This causes stress.

The next section should have a lot of interaction. Ask them if they see the signs of being stressed and what those things look like for each of them. Then ask what they do to relieve stress and what they do to cope. Encourage them to share by telling a story about yourself. You don't have to tell them anything so personal it makes you uncomfortable, but share something about how you have dealt with stress so they will feel comfortable sharing.

Try and go through each of these ideas and see if the students have any others. Or share other ideas you may have.

Focus on some of the long-term ideas. Managing your time, talking to someone, and reducing alcohol intake are all things that truly work and should be encouraged.

- D. How do we manage stress?
- a. Currently, we joke around, work out, listen to music, or something like that. The fact is that law enforcement officers are not always the best at this. We seem to believe that holding things in and not letting others be aware of our situation is better than the alternative. The problem with this is that these things build up, and at some point, you will implode. Lose your cool, act erratically, drink more, gamble,
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or some other foolish thing primarily because you have yet to deal with the issue. The stigma that goes along with the people that help others needing help is not an easy one to get over.

b. When it comes down to it, we must be better at managing stress and minimizing what stresses us out. What are your coping mechanisms? How do you manage stress? Here are some different coping strategies that might be useful to you.

- i. **Counting to ten**, sometimes you may have to do this multiple times but focusing on counting and breathing will allow you time and distraction from the event causing stress.
- ii. **Breathing exercises**, in most cases, just concentrating on your breathing with a rhythmic pattern will assist you in calming down and helping with the stress imposed by whatever has caused your issue. Practice breathing; it sounds funny, but breathe in, count to four, hold your breath for four, let it out for four, and hold it for four. Repeat this as many times as needed to help you through the issue.
- iii. **Listening to music**, is something that relaxes you or can take your mind off of what is causing you stress.
- iv. **Exercising**, same thing here, getting out and getting the blood flowing has the ability to refocus your thought and energy as well as all the positive chemical changes in the body.
- v. **Sleep**, allowing your body to recoup. You should try and get 7 to 8 hours of sleep each day

c. Some of the more long-term things might be:

- i. **Changing your diet**, a balanced diet can support a healthy immune system and the repair of damaged cells. It provides the extra energy needed to cope with stressful events. Early research suggests that certain foods like polyunsaturated fats, including omega-3 fats and vegetables, may help to regulate cortisol levels.
 - ii. **Reduce alcohol intake**, avoiding alcohol can reduce stress by breaking the cycle of drinking as a way of coping with stress. Alcohol is a depressant and may relax you in the short term, but it has lasting negative effects.
 - iii. **Talk to someone**, talking to someone, in most cases, allows you to not only get the thing that is causing you to stress off your chest it allows gives you the ability to get some feedback. It is even more positive when you talk to someone who does not have a relationship with you. I am talking about a counselor. Being able to talk about anything without consequence is amazing. You can say what you want to say without fear that it will hurt someone's feelings or upset someone.
 - iv. **Manage your time**, schedules are important to manage stress because they guide you in determining your priorities so that you can spend the right time on the right tasks. They also remind you of any forthcoming deadlines. Following a schedule causes less anxiety, forms healthy habits, and increases productivity in your everyday activities.
 - v. **Learn to say no**, when you take on more than you can handle, stress is inevitable. Learn how to manage the things on your plate so it does not overflow.
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- vi. **Avoid the things that cause you stress**, take some time, and think about what are the things that cause you stress. Now you won't be able to avoid some of them, but for others, steer clear.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KYC5Ssjx8> The video is about 2 minutes long and discusses stress and how you process it. Not a bad addition to the class if you have time.

d. You have to take action now, or you will suffer later. Think about all the things that cause you stress and slowly work on finding a way to reduce or eliminate that stress. This is something you can do.

E. Police Suicide

a. "The preservation of the Soldier's health should be the commander's first and greatest care." George Washington

b. A new study provided exclusively to USA TODAY from the Ruderman Family Foundation, a private philanthropic organization that advocates for people with disabilities, found that police officers and firefighters continue to be more likely to die by suicide than working in the line of duty, maintaining a similar finding the group concluded in a 2018 study. But in 2020, COVID-19 became the leading cause of death for law enforcement officers. June 10, 2022 (2)

c. Despite suicide rates for the general population declining by 3 percent, or 1,656 people, from 2019 to 2020, according to CDC data, the rates among first responders showed moderate to no decrease from 2017 to 2020, the Ruderman study found. (2)

d. Like many who encounter trauma in their line of work, first responders can struggle with dropping work from their minds when they get home, Bar Nissim said. "These characteristics and traits of the role don't go away when they take off the uniform," Bar Nissim said. "Being heroic, being brave, identifying mental health as a sign of weakness, it's something that stays with them even as they take off the uniforms."

e. Some of the earliest research in first responder-related stress found that the most helpful coping behavior in the aftermath of a traumatic event was talking to others about the incident. (3) This belief in the power of peers to help individual officers cope with stress and trauma is not an accident. Community resiliency is important to individual mental health, and "sharing one's difficulties and struggles with close friends in times of hardship can actually be nourishing." The close-knit community of law enforcement can actually be an important protective factor for officer mental health if it is allowed to set aside a culture of stoicism and emphasis on personal strength. This cultural shift is happening in the law enforcement profession and is to be celebrated and further encouraged through partnerships with clinicians who can note and affirm the existing group structures in their work. (3)

f. A growing body of evidence shows that developing stress resilience and self-regulation skills in officers can mitigate the negative effects of stress on decision-making. In addition to learning to quickly regain their physiological and psychological balance after intense moments on the job, officers can be given tools that help them manage the thoughts and emotions that come up long after incidents have passed. Data suggest that "training in resilience building and self-regulation skills could significantly benefit police organizations by improving judgment and decision-making" and decreasing the frequency of on-the-job errors that can result in injuries or death. (3)

g. One of the biggest challenges to suicide prevention programs for law enforcement professionals is well discussed and largely agreed upon: culture. “It should come as no surprise that a western psychology which emerges in an individualistic culture might propose or assume that the individual possesses the resources necessary to adapt to disasters or that the goal of interventions would be able to empower individuals.” This cultural expectation—that the individual will manage their own reactions to trauma and to seek specialized help when necessary—has largely failed law enforcement officers. (3)

h. The 2020 report to congress points out that the departments that have been successful in lowering their suicide rates are the ones that have continued to focus on the education and training of individuals in this area, as well as creating support networks such as peer-to-peer programs. But the report also stresses that one of the biggest challenges to suicide prevention programs in agencies continues to be the law enforcement “culture,” and that too many officers still fear both the stigma and the possible consequences of asking for help. (3)

i. Know that the departments in New Mexico offer the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). It is covered by insurance and is confidential. If you feel like you need help, do not hesitate to call, it is completely anonymous. Life is too short to spend time worrying, stressed, and upset, so get help if you feel at all like you need it.

The police suicide component is put into this block of instruction to encourage the idea of taking care of ourselves and those around us. We will all face some sort of problem that results in us questioning why. The fact is we need to be better about recognizing the signs and symptoms and working towards helping our brothers and sisters through whatever stressful event they are tackling.

F. Conclusion

a. Stress management should be something thought about each and every day. What can I do today to minimize my stress levels or remove some stress from my life. Your agency needs you and wants you to be happy and healthy. Use the things discussed in this training to focus on what you can do to better yourself and your situation.

Evaluation – Exercise

Each student will put together a letter to themselves with the intent of identifying the following:

- 1) What personal stressors do you have in your life?
- 2) What work-related stressors do you have in your life?
- 3) What can you do short-term to eliminate or reduce that stress?
- 4) What can you do long-term to eliminate or reduce that stress?

The evaluation for this class is an introspective letter designed for the student to identify comprehension by thoroughly documenting a reminder on how they will take care of themselves.

The recommendation is to scan the letter and save it to a file they may refer to regularly to remind themselves of the plan to stay above water.

COURSE AUDIT

PRIMARY INSTRUCTOR:

SECONDARY INSTRUCTOR:

SUPPORT STAFF:

DATE(S)/ TIME(S) OF INSTRUCTION:

LOCATION OF INSTRUCTION:

RECOMMENDED CURRICULUM CHANGES: Identify inaccurate information, outdated information, new information to be added to update material, etc. (Use additional pages if necessary)

ADDITIONAL INSTRUCTOR COMMENTS: (If any portion of the course content was not presented, indicate the specific content here)

Alternative curriculum was taught.

Accreditation number of alternative curriculum:

SIGNATURE

DATE

Primary Instructor

Reviewed by Program Coordinator

Reviewed by

Reviewed by Director/Chief or Designee