



6 TACTICS TO AVOID PATROL BURNOUT

EFFECTIVE FITNESS TRAINING
RESOURCE GUIDE

Every cop will deal with burnout.

Joining a profession as difficult as law enforcement ensures you'll experience it at some point in time.

And many police careers get derailed because of it.

But what exactly is “burnout”?

“Burnout is a reaction to prolonged or chronic job stress. It is characterized by three main dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism (less identification with the job), and feelings of reduced professional ability. More simply put, if you feel exhausted, start to hate your job, and begin to feel less capable at work, you are showing signs of burnout.”

(Maslach C, Leiter MP., 2016)

It was also described as ‘the extinction of motivation or incentive’ by Herbert Freudenberger in his book, “Burnout: The High Cost of High Achievement.”

More recently, research focus has turned to exhaustion and disengagement in particular as the main dimensions of burnout:

“In this context, exhaustion refers to being physically, cognitively and emotionally drained of energy as a result of exposure to job demands while disengagement is expressed as distancing oneself from work and adopting a negative attitude toward work-related objects and tasks.”

(Ogińska-Bulik N, Juczyński Z., 2021)

Police work is incredibly stressful.

Shift work and the daily rigors of the job creates less than ideal sleep patterns.

Poor leadership and toxic environments foster a culture of cynicism.

And society does its best to make cops feel that they are unable to perform how they need to in order to be successful.

So it's not a surprise that police officers experience such a high rate of burnout.

It's one reason you see so many police officers "give up" on the mission so early in their careers.

Here are some **symptoms of burnout**:

- Concentration issues
- Depressed mood
- Feeling worthless
- Loss of interest or pleasure
- Suicidal ideation

Being an effective police officer is hard enough.

Imagine how difficult it becomes once an officer is in the fog of burnout dealing with the inability to concentrate, loss of interest, or worse.

Additionally, research suggests burnout has a predictive role for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which indicates that officers experiencing burnout have less energy to deal with traumatic stressors, and as a result, are more prone to PTSD. (Liu Y, et al., 2021)

What causes burnout?

The work of a patrol officer in particular requires constant attention to high-demand, high-risk scenarios.

Patrol officers are exposed to violent criminal offenders and the suffering of victims on a regular basis and deal with them under heavy criticism, lack of resources, and lagging public support.

Officers working the beat deal with high call volume and often have little to no breaks in between those calls.

There's very little downtime to ever "recharge."

You must perform at a high level, have intense focus at all times, and be committed to the mission at hand.

Burnout simply extinguishes all of that.

Here are other law enforcement-specific **factors that can contribute to burnout:**

- Unrealistic expectations
- Constant high-stress situations
- Consequences of mistakes
- Lack of recognition
- Communication challenges
- Compensation challenges

It's clear why cops experience such burnout.

So what can you do?

Know when your cup is full.

Imagine that every police officer has a cup.

The cup represents the capacity for dealing with stress and maintaining emotional balance.

Everyone's cup is a different size.

The bigger the cup, the more stress you can "hold" without letting it negatively affect your ability to perform and maintain that balance.

The smaller the cup, the less stress you can handle.

When our cup fills, no matter the size, it spills over. That's when we experience the symptoms described above.

We can increase the size of our cup by engaging in healthy behaviors.

We also shrink it by engaging in unhealthy behaviors.

We can also change how full our cup is in the same manner: unhealthy behaviors fill it quickly, healthy behaviors help manage how quick or often that occurs.

But everyone's cup has a limit.

When your cup is approaching full capacity, learn to recognize that and take the appropriate action.

Predicting that ahead of time will prove critical over a long career:

“Predicting burnout symptoms and posttraumatic stress symptoms allows preventive action to be taken. Such measures are especially important, as burnout is typically a process that develops over a number of years, and early recognition of its development is a crucial step in reducing the likelihood of other negative consequences associated with occupational stress.” **(Ogińska-Bulik N, Juczyński Z., 2021)**

Throughout a police officer’s career, there will be times where simply taking time off will allow that officer to avoid the spillover.

Of course, many officers prove rather stubborn when it comes to taking time off.

It’s when you hear the excuses of "the team needs me", "I might miss something", "I gotta be there"...

These are just excuses.

The team will be fine.

You're not going to miss anything.

Take time off when you need it.

Change environments.

Patrol work strains the typical officer because of the immense volume of energy required on a regular basis.

There will be points in an officer's career where a change of environment will be beneficial.

Officers should seek to explore different opportunities within the department that allow for a break from the grind of patrol work.

This could include applying for different units or even temporary assignments with a different section of the department.

If these opportunities aren't available to officers, leadership should make changes to ensure they are.

Be above the standard.

Many officers, however, will say that they "can't" change their environment.

There simply aren't any opportunities available to them.

Which leads to the next critical factor in dealing with burnout:

Consistently working to be as capable as possible (i.e. striving to be above the standard).

Becoming proficient and maintaining that standard ensures that additional opportunities will be available throughout your career.

Opportunities that aren't available to officers who decide to spend most of their working days sitting in a parking lot or avoiding calls.

Likewise, achieving and maintaining that standard mitigates one of the causes of burnout (feelings of reduced ability) by ensuring confidence in one's capability to perform.

When you're staying up to date on case law and or spending extra time dry firing, you're mitigating the potential for mistakes to be made.

In turn this enhances an officer's ability to deal with adversity and stress.

Optimize health and wellness.

Officers must prioritize health and wellness.

You can look around and see what happens when police officers don't.

Everyone knows an officer who has "let himself go":

Look how he walks, acts, his attitude towards others, what goals he's accomplishing...

To be better you must live better by prioritizing:

- Physical fitness
- Nutrition
- Sleep
- Hydration
- Stress management
- Recovery

Sleep in particular is a critical component that many officers struggle with.

Especially on the night shift.

But sleep is vital for concentration, focus, and overall mental awareness.

And too many cops accept poor sleep habits as just "part of the job".

Don't be fooled: lack of sleep is not some badge of honor.

You have to prioritize sleep - there is no "hack" around this.

Yes, it takes deliberate actions.

Here's [7 tips for officers working night shift.](#)

Understand organizational factors.

According to research, there's three specific protective factors (something that reduces the negative risk of) that correlate with burnout in police officers (**Correia, I., et al., 2023**):

1. **Organizational justice** - The perception of “fairness” and the manner in which authorities within a department communicate procedural details and justify their decisions using honest and truthful information.
2. **Organizational identification** - How individuals define themselves, respectively, in terms of the organization in which they are a member or the professional activity they perform.
3. **Meaningful work** - Work that gives you a sense of purpose and fulfillment and creates a sense of accomplishment, impact, and overall well-being.

The state of a department's culture is largely based on these factors.

When a department creates a culture of honest communication, officers become more likely to identify positively with the organization. This also leads to a more positive association with the “meaning” of the work an officer is engaged in.

Understand organizational factors.

Alternatively, department's with toxic cultures breed the cynicism and distrust that causes burnout in the first place.

For officers, it's important to recognize when these factors are a symptom of the specific agency one is working for as opposed to the law enforcement profession itself.

Many officers thrive by simply switching agencies which is an option that should also be on the table for an officer that wants to ensure a successful career.

The role of the supervisor.

A supervisor's role within a police department is critical to preventing and addressing burnout within patrol officers.

Supervisors are the ones that have the most pull in guiding the organizational issues that drive fairness and respect.

Supervisors should prioritize respectful leadership strategies that give voice to their officers, reward them fairly, and encourage transparent processes for adjudicating discipline. **(Correia, I., et al., 2023)**

Supervisors must also be knowledgeable on the symptoms of burnout to better raise awareness of the importance of managing stress.

Supervisors should also work to identify particular sources of stress within the organization and ensure intervention strategies are in place to provide officers with the help they need when experiencing those symptoms. **(Ogińska-Bulik N, Juczyński Z, 2021)**

Citations

Correia, I., Romão, Â., Almeida, A.E. et al. Protecting Police Officers Against Burnout: Overcoming a Fragmented Research Field. *J Police Crim Psych* 38, 622–638 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11896-023-09584-4>

Liu Y, Zou L, Yan S, Zhang P, Zhang J, Wen J, Mao J, Li L, Wang Y, Fu W. Burnout and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms among medical staff two years after the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan, China: Social support and resilience as mediators. *J Affect Disord*. 2023 Jan 15;321:126-133. doi: 10.1016/j.jad.2022.10.027. Epub 2022 Oct 21. PMID: 36280200; PMCID: PMC9585849.

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Ogińska-Bulik N, Juczyński Z. Burnout and posttraumatic stress symptoms in police officers exposed to traumatic events: the mediating role of ruminations. *Int Arch Occup Environ Health*. 2021 Aug;94(6):1201-1209. doi: 10.1007/s00420-021-01689-9. Epub 2021 Apr 27. PMID: 33904972; PMCID: PMC8292295.

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