

Chapter 8

Stress Management

3 Hours

Nancy VanWinkle, White County 911

Revised: January 3, 2018

Arkansas Basic Telecommunicator Course

References:

APCO Institute Public Safety Telecommunicator 1, Seventh Edition, 2016

National Emergency Number Association, www.nena.org

Boston Public Health Commission 2015

Northern Illinois University, 2012

The Journal of Emergency Dispatch July 7, 2016

Training Aids:

Prezi Presentation
Computer

Coordination/Personnel:

Gary "Bud" Gray, North Little Rock Emergency Services
Steve Harrison, Central EMS
Carla Holcroft, Washington County Sheriff's Office
Shannon McCuin, University of Arkansas Police Department
Amy Barnette, White County 911
Elizabeth Jones, ALETA Instructor, Camden

Instructional Unit Summary:

Chapter 8 Stress Management

Lesson Purpose:

The purpose of this block of instruction is to teach the student the meaning of stress, the warning signs of stress, and how to prevent stress.

Instructional Objectives:

The student will be able to:

1. Define what stress is for a Telecommunicator.
2. Identify different types of stress.
3. Describe and know the Physical and Physiological changes during The Fight-or-Flight Response.
4. Describe strategies for dealing with stress.
5. Demonstrate the ability to effectively handle Stress-Management Techniques.
6. List the eight (8) tips for reducing stress.
7. Define what Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and how it relates to 911 Telecommunicators.
8. Define and describe Critical Incidents, Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD), and EAPs.

I. INTRODUCTION

Stress is your body's way of responding to any kind of demand. Being a Public Safety Telecommunicator is extremely stressful. It requires shift work which is hard on the body and mind. Having weekends off is never heard of unless you are a seasoned Telecommunicator.

Many centers are not fully staffed. This can take a toll on vacations or time off request. Telecommunicators miss out on family functions which can be hard for relatives to understand. Any extended amount of stress that a Telecommunicator endures is very hazardous to their health.

II. BODY

A. Define what stress is and causation for a Telecommunicator.

1. Definition of stress:

a. According to an APCO article published in February of 2006, stress for a Telecommunicator has been defined as our response to anxiety-producing events, our reaction to change and the non-specific response of the body and the demand made on it. No matter what definition you use stress involves our response to an event.

2. Causation:

a. Being a Telecommunicator is an important job and it takes a caring person to be able to make a difference in this profession. The stress of listening to someones worse day EVERYDAY as a routine part of our job can be the causation of our stress. Therefore, it is important that the Telecommunicator be able to recognize the

warning signs of stress and learn to reduce it while under the headset.

B. List the four (4) different types of stress.

1. Mental Stress

- a. Being a Telecommunicator is mentally stressful. There are a lot of things to learn and remember which can be overwhelming to the Telecommunicator.
- b. The responsibilities of a Telecommunicator are great. They deal with life and death situations daily. The stress of performing at a high level of professionalism can have a great bearing on their mental state.
- c. The apparent signs of being mentally stressed are:
 - Feeling anxious, irritable or depressed
 - Difficulty concentrating
 - Apathy, loss of interest in work, job dissatisfaction
 - Social withdraw
 - Low morale
 - Use of alcohol and drugs to cope
- d. Long-term mental stress can cause “burnout.” Burnout among Telecommunicators is one of the main reasons it is hard to retain seasoned employees.

2. Physical Stress

- a. Working in a PSAP can be physically stressful. Sitting at a console for hours at a time with no break can be very hard.

- b. The apparent signs of physical stress are soreness in the back, neck, shoulders or joints, indigestion or heartburn headaches, weight gain, sleeplessness and a constant feeling of exhaustion.
3. Positive Stress
 - a. Helps us reach our peak efficiency.
 - b. We achieve our peak efficiency and do our best work when it is busy, but once the rush is over; we relax and enjoy a job well done. An example of positive stress is a busy Friday night.
4. Negative Stress
 - a. Negative stress creates a work environment that is less than stellar. Management of a PSAP can provide positive reinforcement to attempt to curb negativity, but ultimately attitude is left up to the individual to change. The Telecommunicator must change their own mindset from negative to positive.
 - b. Negative stress negative stress could be caused by:
 - Mandatory overtime.
 - Long hours.
 - Rotating Shifts.
 - No breaks due to staff shortage.
 - c. Effects of Stress in the workplace:
 - Increased absenteeism and tardiness
 - Decreased productivity
 - Increased employee turnover

- Disciplinary problems
- d. Telecommunicators forced to work mandatory overtime could change their negative attitude, understanding that their job is important for them to be present. They could assist management by promoting the department in a positive image.
- C. Describe and know the Physical and Physiological changes during The Fight-or-Flight Response.
1. The fight-or-flight response occurs when there is an immediate or physical threat. This is a natural instinct.
 2. The fight-or-flight response gives an adrenaline high or helps us deal with perceived emergencies. An example of a fight-or-flight response is you receive a shooting call and your brain perceives it as a threat to your body. Your body will react and start the fight-or-flight response.
 3. There are three (3) physical and physiological changes that take place during a fight-or-flight response:
 - a. Increased heart rate.
 - b. Dilated pupils
 - c. Increased blood pressure
 4. Some of the common warning signs of being under too much stress are:
 - a. Muscle tightness
 - b. Headaches
 - c. Heartburn
 - d. Upset Stomach
 - e. Irritability

5. Stress may be caused by interpersonal conflict within the PSAP. Most interpersonal conflict happens whenever the needs, wants, and desires of one person clash with another.

An example of interpersonal conflict is when two Telecommunicators working on the same shift disagree on temperature settings. There may be a conflict of needs between the employees.

D. Strategies for dealing with Stress.

1. Breathing is an easy stress-management technique that any Telecommunicator can use while at the console or at home.
2. Breathing slowly and deeply can reduce your heart rate and your stress level. The next time you are feeling stress take a few seconds and do this breathing technique at your console.
 - a. Breathe in through your nose for four (4) seconds.
 - b. Hold for seven (7) seconds.
 - c. Breathe out for eight (8).
 - d. Repeat three (3) times.

E. List the Eight (8) tips for reducing stress

1. Eat a good meal before going to work or take a healthy meal with you
2. Make sure you get adequate sleep.
3. Get away from the communications center for a few minutes.

4. Shift your physical position often.
5. Leave work problems at work and personal problems at home.
6. Accept that you cannot solve all problems.
7. Maintain a positive attitude.
8. Contact your agencies Employee Assistance Program.
 - a. Office Environment: When working in an office environment, it is of utmost importance that each employee takes regular breaks. This includes standing up periodically and/or walking around the office to effectively reduce ones stress level. You manage stress all shift long and your body will hold onto the stress unless you make healthy choices to alleviate the stress.
 - b. Time: During your off time, your schedule should include an exercise plan. Telecommunicators are devoted to providing service to members of their community, but it is essential that they devote time in taking care of themselves as well.
 - c. Mental Health: Telecommunicators are used to processing calls from people dealing with mental health issues, but what happens if the Telecommunicator starts to have mental health issues? A study conducted by Northern Illinois University suggests that, "On-the-job, indirect exposure to trauma puts dispatchers at risk for developing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and

that dispatchers experience high levels of “peritraumatic distress,” the strong emotions felt during a traumatic event” (Northern Illinois University, 2012).

F. PTSD and 911 Telecommunicators

PTSD is real for 911 Telecommunicators. As the first – first responder you hear terror in calls that cannot be erased from your mind. In one day you can receive many of these types of calls. On most occasions, you only know the beginning of the event and never the conclusion of it.

1. The Journal of Emergency Dispatch (July 7, 2016) reports that “The rate of PTSD across Telecommunicators is somewhere between 18 percent and 24 percent.” The article further more states “PTSD has four symptom clusters:
 - a. avoidance (avoiding thoughts, memories, or feelings that bring back memories of a particularly upsetting call);
 - b. numbing (feeling detached, feeling as though the world has changed or that the world is a bad, malicious place);
 - c. hypervigilance (having a strong startle response, feeling on edge all the time, having trouble concentrating or sleeping);
 - d. re-experiencing (flashbacks, unwanted thoughts, thoughts about the call that come up repeatedly).
2. The most commonly reported symptom by Telecommunicators was hypervigilance: feeling keyed up or agitated; feeling on edge; trouble concentrating and sleeping. Some of that is related to the job—being

on high alert all the time. I was surprised because I thought that avoidance would be necessary to do the job, as burying certain experiences could be helpful when having to handle similar calls. In fact, it turned out to be one of the lower symptom clusters. Hypervigilance really stuck out. Given that, Telecommunicators who present as really keyed up and who can't calm down and may use alcohol and drugs to fall asleep stand out as having some of the bigger warning signs when looking for Telecommunicators at risk for PTSD.”

- H. Define and describe Critical Incidents and Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD).
1. A critical incident is a normal reaction to an abnormal event.
 2. Critical incident stress can be initiated by death or serious injury to responders, serious auto accidents, injuries or abuse to children, weather related incidents or the death of family members that have occurred while the Telecommunicator is on duty.
 - a. Usually a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) takes place within the first twenty-four (24) to forty-eight (48) hours after a critical incident has taken place. This process is designed to lessen the overall impact of a traumatic incident.
 - b. Usually a team of trained individuals will guide the affected employees through a group discussion allowing individuals involved i.e. responders and Telecommunicators to talk about the situation so they can put an emotional closure on the incident.

- c. Some agencies have an EAP (Employee Assistance Program). EAPs are intended to help employees cope with personal problems that might adversely impact their job performance, family life, health and well-being.

III. CONCLUSION

Even though being a Telecommunicator is a very stressful profession, there are ways to decrease or eliminate the stress. It is the choice of the Telecommunicator to take care of themselves. A positive attitude at work and working together as a team will help decrease the stress level. Taking care of yourself will reduce stress and create a positive work environment. Telecommunicators are very elite group of individuals and should be proud of the job they do. You can't control when the next critical incident comes your way, but you can plan for your response when it inevitably does.