

# When Stress Builds Up:

## Strategies to Overcome Cumulative Stress and Burnout

### Guidance for Agency Leaders

**Policing is a rewarding and, at times, difficult career. Officers frequently experience stressful situations ranging from interpersonal conflicts to managing tense community interactions when responding to traumatic events.**

Life stressors, critical incidents, and trauma affect every officer differently. Stress can compound and accumulate even when it is not directly related to one specific event. The cumulative impact of any type of stressors can contribute to burnout and impact an officer's job satisfaction, performance, relationships, and mental and physical health. But officers can learn skills to help them cope with these difficult situations and manage stress.

### What is Cumulative Stress?

According to the American Psychological Association, **“stress is a normal reaction to everyday pressures but can become unhealthy when it upsets your day-to-day functioning.”**<sup>1</sup> Stress occurs when officers feel too much pressure or when too many difficult events happen in their life, which can include witnessing critical events in the community, working overtime, and extra obligations at home. Stress can also cause physical and mental health problems, leading to an officer feeling overwhelmed, indifferent, exhausted, or irritable.<sup>2</sup> “Cumulative stress” occurs when this stress builds up over time.

Officers often experience a number of stressors, and one may lead to another. For example, having financial problems may lead to working too much overtime, which may impact an officer's family life.

Cumulative stress and vicarious trauma can occur together. There are unique differences between cumulative stress and vicarious trauma. Vicarious trauma can occur when police officers witness or interact with people who are in physically or emotionally stressful, painful, or violent situations.<sup>5</sup> Regular exposure to these situations can add to cumulative stress, burnout, depression, and moral injury; it may even lead to post-traumatic stress responses. For some officers, the signs of vicarious trauma can look similar to or overlap with signs of stress or burnout. Addressing and healing vicarious trauma may require professional help.

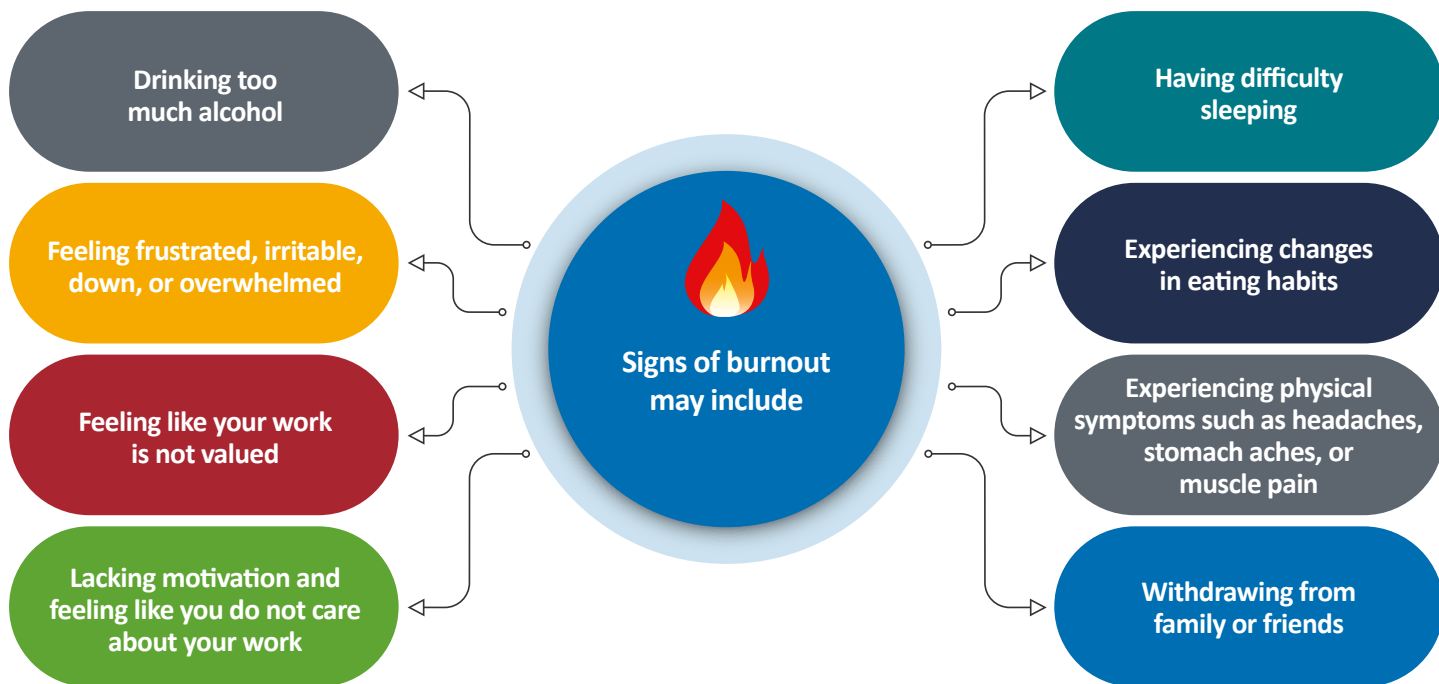
Work factors may include:<sup>3,4,5</sup>

- Challenges with supervisors and other colleagues
- Too much overtime
- Rotating shifts
- Feeling a lack of appreciation or recognition
- Intense work pressures from leadership or the community
- Responding to emotionally demanding situations

Personal factors may include:<sup>6</sup>

- Family matters
- Financial problems
- Health issues
- Lack of sleep

Long-term exposure to stressful factors or situations can cause cumulative stress and ultimately lead to burnout, which is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion.



## The Importance of Addressing Stress and Burnout Early

According to a 2018 survey of 8,000 officers, **79 percent** of participants said they had suffered critical stress at some point during their duties as law enforcement officers. Critical stress was defined as “a strong emotional reaction that overwhelms usually effective coping abilities.”<sup>6</sup> In addition, **69 percent** of respondents reported that stressful experiences as a police officer caused unresolved or lingering mental health challenges. These unresolved mental health challenges contributed

to a range of effects in their lives, including sleep problems, relationship problems, and thoughts of suicide.

A build-up of critical stress may negatively impact job performance, including making decisions and protecting oneself and others.<sup>7</sup> It may also negatively affect an officer’s relationships with family members and friends. Fortunately, addressing the buildup of stress early can help avoid these negative effects.

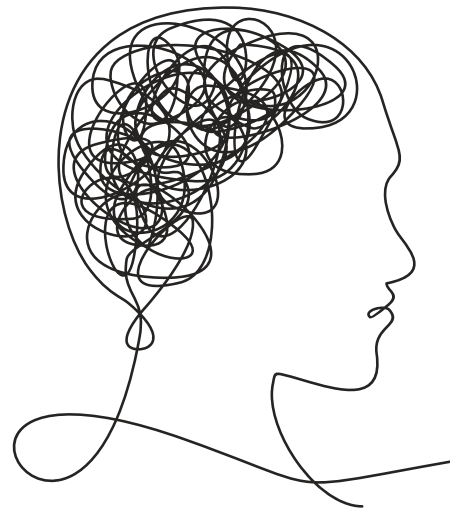
## What Can Agencies and Supervisors Do?

Agency culture and supervisory staff have a key role in ensuring that officers have the tools, strategies, and support they need to navigate difficult or stressful experiences. Here are some things police agencies and supervisors can do to help officers cope:

- **Create a work culture across all levels of the agency that encourages talking about stressors, taking care of oneself, and supporting others**
- **Support taking time off or changes in work schedules and job duties, when appropriate**
- **Provide formal and informal recognition for excellent performance**
- **Provide training and wellness programs on how to build resilience and cope with difficult work situations and stress**
- **Encourage officers to support each other and access peer support**
- **Provide and encourage use of employee assistance programs, including mental health services**

Another way for agencies and supervisors to support officers in preventing harmful cumulative stress is to teach them how to self-assess when stress begins to accumulate. Officers can learn skills to help them manage stress and navigate adversity. Making wellness a priority and developing a culture that supports officer well-being is crucial to maintaining a healthy and safe department.

The attached tool can be used to help officers understand the potential effects of cumulative stress, acknowledge the signs of rising stress, normalize help seeking, and learn how to cope *before* burnout sets in. Agencies and supervisors can share this tool with their officers in a variety of ways, including posting it on roll call boards and in locker rooms, sending it out in newsletters, or handing it out during wellness sessions.



## Endnotes

- 1 "Stress relief is within reach." American Psychological Association. October, 2019. <https://www.apa.org/topics/stress/>
- 2 "Feeling Scorched: Burnout, Traumatic Stress and the Need for Self-Care." IAFF Recovery Center, November 7, 2019. <https://www.iaffrecoverycenter.com/blog/feeling-scorched/>.
- 3 "Officer Work Hours, Stress and Fatigue." National Institute of Justice. July 31, 2012. <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/officer-work-hours-stress-and-fatigue>.
- 4 Coghlan, Thomas E. "Fostering Positive Outcomes in Policing by Addressing Burnout and Compassion Fatigue." Police Chief 86, no. 5 (May 2019): 30-37. <https://www.policechiefmagazine.org/addressing-burnout-compassion-fatigue/?ref=97cddb5afa9f7dbcf8d0bfc12d4d6f2d>.
- 5 "Report on FOP/NBC Survey of Police Officer Mental and behavioral health" Accessed September 20, 2021. <https://files.fop.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/OfficerWellnessSurvey.pdf>.
- 6 "Officer Work Hours"
- 7 Nall, Rachel. "The Parasympathetic Nervous System Explained." Healthline. Healthline Media, April 23, 2020. <https://www.healthline.com/health/parasympathetic-nervous-system>.

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