

When Stress Builds Up:

Strategies to Overcome Cumulative Stress and Burnout

Guidance for Law Enforcement Officers

How to Tell If Stress Is Accumulating

You may be experiencing a buildup of stress and approaching burnout if you:

- **Feel anxious, dread, or depressed about going to work**
- **Find it hard to get yourself to work and do your job**
- **Feel frustrated about your job**
- **Feel physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted from your work**

If any of these describe how you are feeling, now is the time to make changes so that you can cope better and avoid negative impacts in your life, relationships, and work.

Overcoming Stress and Burnout

There are numerous proven strategies to protect against and address the impacts of stress and burnout. It is best to incorporate strategies into daily routines both on- and off-duty. Coping strategies for stress and methods to avoid burnout include:



Taking at least three full deep breaths.

Extend your exhale to be longer than your inhale. This can activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which is known as the “rest and digest” part of your nervous system.¹ Taking several breaths with an extended exhale can serve as a hack to help relax the fight, flight, freeze part of your nervous system.



Building positive thinking patterns, such as reminding yourself of a time you felt proud of something you did or a time when a colleague or community member provided positive feedback about your work.

The brain is like a muscle. As you train your brain, it will develop new habits. Refocusing on positive situations and events can help combat feelings of being unappreciated and break a cycle of unhealthy detachment.



Reflecting on at least one thing you are grateful for each day.

Genuine gratitude has been shown to help people deal with adversity.³ Expressions of gratitude can be internal, such as thinking of something you are thankful for, or through actions, such as sending a thank-you note, keeping a gratitude log, or telling another person that you appreciate them.



Recognizing and addressing physical reactions.

Be aware of areas where you hold tension in your body. Stretch, use progressive muscle relaxation, or engage in physical exercise that helps to address this tension. As you stretch these areas, allow yourself to let go of stress in those muscles.



Listening to music you enjoy.

Words and musical rhythms can impact our emotions. Choose music that you find uplifting.

Other strategies to help you cope include:



If you feel more stress than you can handle or begin to feel burnout, talk with someone such as a peer, family member, or supervisor. You can also seek help from a medical provider, employee assistance program, mental health professional, peer support, or chaplain. It can be very helpful to reach out to others for support to help manage stress and prevent burnout.

Seeking help at early signs of stress accumulating can help prevent the onset of mental health disorders, such as anxiety, mood disorders and post-traumatic stress injury.

Asking for help is not weak or shameful. It takes strength and courage.

Visit www.theiacp.org/OSW for more resources and information to support officer safety and wellness, including resilience and mental wellness.

Agency Specific Resources

Endnotes

- 1 Nall, Rachel. "The Parasympathetic Nervous System Explained." Healthline. Healthline Media, April 23, 2020. <https://www.healthline.com/health/parasympathetic-nervous-system>.
- 2 Vercelletto, Christina. "How to Do the 4-7-8 Breathing Exercise to Relax and Lower Stress." Livestrong.com. Leaf Group, April 13, 2020. <https://www.livestrong.com/article/149332-4-7-8-breathing-exercises/>.
- 3 "Giving Thanks Can Make You Happier." Harvard Health, August 14, 2021. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier>.

For more officer wellness resources visit: www.theIACP.org/OSW

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