

Identifying and Managing Anxiety in Law Enforcement Officers

Law enforcement officers can experience a full range of mental health concerns, including anxiety. In addition to experiencing similar risk factors, stressors, and life situations as other adults, officers are usually exposed to more stressful situations than the average person. As a result, many officers may spend more time in an anxious state than adults working in other professions.

Although anxiety is common and even a biologically important state, prolonged periods of anxiety can be harmful. This resource provides officers with several strategies to manage anxiety, prevent harmful effects, and maintain a state of emotional well-being.

What Is Anxiety?

Anxiety is an emotional state that includes feelings of apprehension and fear, physical symptoms of tension, and anticipation that something dangerous or negative is going to occur.¹ There are psychological and biological processes that occur in the body in response to anxiety, all preparing it to respond to a potentially dangerous situation. For example, if an officer suddenly recognizes an escalating situation that poses a risk to their physical safety, anxiety is the emotional state that prepares their body to respond. Feelings of anxiety about situations which are life-threatening, and those that are not, can occur. It is common to occasionally feel worried about fulfilling expectations, how to achieve accomplishments, what the future may hold, or other unknown and/or difficult areas of life.^{2,3}

When Is Anxiety a Problem?

Feeling anxious is common, and a normal occurrence during a police officer's course of duty. However, anxiety may be a problem when it is overwhelming, uncontrollable, or interferes with daily activities. Anxiety disorders are medical conditions, like physical disorders such as heart disease or diabetes, which are treatable and need to be taken seriously.²

There are several different types of anxiety disorders. Some people have anxiety that is specific to social situations (social phobia), others to obsessive thinking (obsessive compulsive disorder), and some experience anxiety related to Post Traumatic Stress Injury/Disorder. Depending on the type of anxiety a person may struggle with, different combinations of medications and/or psychological treatment can help.

For law enforcement officers, anxiety may be problematic when it intensifies before going into work, or when responding to a specific type of call. Maintaining a grounded state of mind and keeping anxiety under control is directly related to officer safety and wellness. Overwhelming anxiety may affect an officer's ability to operate safely during their shift and limit the ability to recover off duty.

Anxiety may cause issues if it:^{2,3,4}

- **Feels like it has a strong hold on your life**
- **Involves excessive or irrational fear about everyday situations or things that are not likely to happen**
- **Involves worrying about worrying**
- **Occurs every day or most days**
- **Lasts longer than 6 months**
- **Contributes to or exacerbates medical problems, such as high blood pressure or diabetes**

What Are the Signs and Symptoms of Anxiety?

The signs and symptoms of anxiety vary somewhat among individuals and different cultures. The most common symptoms include but are not limited to the following:^{3,5}

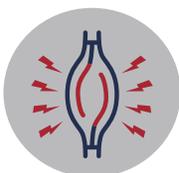
Mental/Emotional

- Feeling nervous, tense, on edge, or restless
- Feeling dread or panic; fearing the worst
- Focusing on negative thoughts and thinking the same thing over and over
- Having difficulty concentrating

During severe circumstances, anxiety attacks (also known as panic attacks) may occur. This may lead you to believe you are having a heart attack. Although it feels like you are losing control, it is very treatable. Symptoms of anxiety attacks may include⁶:

- Palpitations, pounding heart, or accelerated heart rate
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Nausea or abdominal distress
- Feeling dizzy, unsteady, light-headed, or faint
- Chills or heat sensations

Physical



Tense muscles



Headaches



Faster breathing



Increased or irregular heart rate



Sweating and/or trembling



Feeling weak or tired



Difficulty sleeping



Stomach discomfort or nausea

What Are Ways to Manage Anxiety?

There are several areas of support for anxiety, depending on the type and severity of the anxiety. Even if an officer's quality of life is not impacted by anxiety, certain strategies can be used to keep calm in intense situations. Below are some psychological approaches based on cognitive behavioral theory, which can be used to manage anxiety:⁷



CATCH IT: Become aware of your anxiety or worry. Notice what is happening in your mind and body as the anxiety is occurring. Check in with your body by moving your focus from the top of your head, slowly down to your toes, to see if there are areas of tightness or tension and relax them.



CHECK IT: Check your thoughts by asking yourself questions such as: Is this true? Is this happening right now? Is there evidence to support this thought? What else could be happening? How important will this be in 6 months?



CHANGE IT: Replace an anxious thought with a thought that is more balanced, realistic, and even comforting. Anxious thoughts can sometimes make things seem much worse than they really are. This is called "catastrophizing." Although

it might be possible that something bad could happen, rather than thinking it is going to happen, change the anxious thoughts to more realistic thoughts. Figure out what triggers the anxiety and what helps manage it by keeping notes of what happens when anxiety occurs and by looking for patterns.

Other ways to manage anxiety include engaging in a distraction strategy such as working out, going for a walk, or calling a friend. You may also consider trying a coping or grounding exercise like one of the following:

Box Breathing

This exercise is a breathing technique that can be done anywhere. This technique helps clear your mind, relax the body, and improve focus. The goal is to return your breathing to a normal rhythm. This exercise is similar to tactical breathing. This concept can be applied throughout your life, not just during high stress, high risk situations.⁸

5, 4, 3, 2, 1 coping technique

This exercise is a calming technique that can help you during periods of anxiety. It takes you through your five senses and reminds you of the present.⁹

Try to make some of these changes part of your daily routine so that with practice you will be able to reduce anxious thoughts and become relaxed more quickly and easily. To support building this into your day-to-day life, build it in to your routine. Smartphone apps can be supportive tools to use on the go. Below are additional strategies that can help manage anxiety:^{3,10}

- **Talk with someone you trust.**
- **Take slow deep breaths.**
- **Listen to music.**
- **Get physical exercise regularly.**
- **Eat a healthy diet.**
- **Limit alcohol and caffeine and avoid energy drinks and tobacco.**
- **Get enough sleep.**
- **Practice yoga, meditation, or other relaxation techniques.**



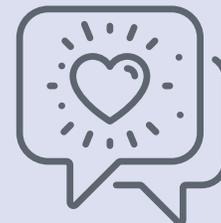
Remember, we all feel anxious at times; the response is a normal, natural part of life. As an officer, you are trained to function in high stress, high anxiety situations. While this training is an important component of officer safety and job performance, there may be times when it feels like anxiety becomes too much or takes control.

If you, or someone you know, is having trouble managing anxiety, reach out for help. For officers who are struggling with moderate to severe effects of anxiety, medication and mental health treatment may be extremely helpful, especially in the beginning of the journey.

What Are Ways to Get Help and Support?

The following are resources and programs that can provide help and support:

- **Trusted family member or friend**
- **Mental health professional or health care provider**
- **Agency's employee assistance program (EAP)**
- **Chaplain**
- **Peer support program**
- **Online support services group**



Remember, it takes strength and courage to seek help. You are not alone.

Resources

- International Association of Chiefs of Police Officer Safety and Wellness: Resources for agencies, command staff, officers, and families on a variety of safety and wellness topics. <https://www.theiacp.org/topics/officer-safety-wellness>
- The Officer Robert Wilson III Preventing Violence Against Law Enforcement Officers and Ensuring Officer Resilience and Survivability (VALOR) Initiative is an effort to improve the immediate and long-term safety, wellness, and resilience of our nation's law enforcement officers. [VALOR Officer Safety and Wellness Initiative | Overview | Bureau of Justice Assistance \(ojp.gov\)](#)
- Anxiety and Depression Association of America: Resources related to understanding and managing the symptoms of anxiety and depression. <https://adaa.org>
- University of Michigan Department of Psychiatry: Cognitive Therapy Skills, a module outlining anxiety management strategies designed to be used alongside mental health counseling. <https://medicine.umich.edu/sites/default/files/content/downloads/Cognitive-Skills-for-Anxiety.pdf>
- University of Rochester Medical Center: 5-4-3-2-1 Coping Technique for Anxiety. <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/behavioral-health-partners/bhp-blog/april-2018/5-4-3-2-1-coping-technique-for-anxiety.aspx>¹¹

Endnotes

- 1 "APA Dictionary of Psychology." American Psychological Association. Accessed July 30, 2021. <https://dictionary.apa.org/anxiety>.
- 2 "Understand the FACTS: Anxiety and Depression Association of America, ADAA." Anxiety Disorders and Depression Research & Treatment. Accessed July 30, 2021. <https://adaa.org/understanding-anxiety>.
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- 7 "Catch it, check it, change it." Accessed July 30, 2021. <https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/health/factsheets/catch.pdf>
- 8 Stinson, Adrienne, and Timothy J Legg. "Box Breathing: How to Do It, Benefits, and Tips." Medical News Today. MediLexicon International, Accessed June 1, 2018. <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/321805>.
- 9 Smith, Sara. "5-4-3-2-1 Coping Technique for Anxiety." *Behavioral Health Partners Blog*. University of Rochester Medical Center. Accessed October 4, 2018. <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/behavioral-health-partners/bhp-blog/april-2018/5-4-3-2-1-coping-technique-for-anxiety.aspx>.
- 10 "Tips to Manage Anxiety and Stress." Anxiety & Depression Association of America. Accessed September 28, 2021. <https://adaa.org/tips>
- 11 "Cognitive Skills for Anxiety - University of Michigan." Accessed September 28, 2021. <https://medicine.umich.edu/sites/default/files/content/downloads/Cognitive-Skills-for-Anxiety.pdf>.

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

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