



# STRESS MANAGEMENT

FOR EMERGENCY PERSONNEL



## What Is Stress?

Stress is a state of physical and mental arousal. It is a normal and necessary part of life. Stress helps you make choices, develop plans, change your behaviors and begin new activities.

Stress can be a very positive force and is crucial in the lives and work of emergency personnel. It gives you a drive to deal with challenges, work safely and protect your colleagues and yourself.

### Types of Stress

**Controlled stress** can help you be innovative, efficient and productive (e.g., shooting straight, precisely applying medical procedures, dealing with a hazardous materials incident).

**Extreme or prolonged stress** is stress that is out of control. It can be destructive to the jobs performed by emergency personnel.

**Uncontrolled stress** is disruptive to your life and your work. It deteriorates mental and physical health, diminishes job performance and threatens personal and professional relationships. Unrestrained stress can alter someone's personality and cause depression – and even suicidal thinking.



What Is Stress?

# Stress Paths

Emergency personnel face four main pathways of stress. Two of them are normal and two of them are abnormal and destructive. See below.

NORMAL	DESTRUCTIVE
General stress	Cumulative stress
Critical incident stress	Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

## 1. General Stress: Normal

**Normal, routine stress of everyday life and work**

- Sometimes negative, sometimes positive, but still manageable
- Can be dealt with and recovered from healthily
- Can accumulate and become destructive if not managed properly

## 2. Cumulative Stress: Destructive

**A pile-up of unresolved general stress**

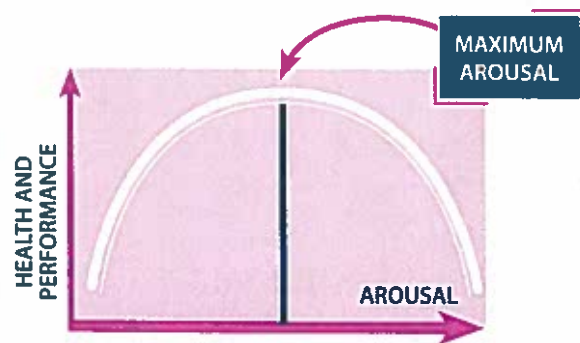
- Sometimes called "burnout"
- Impairs or blocks job and home performance
- Threatens mental and physical health
- Strains personal and work relationships
- Alters a personality
- Easily resolved if recognized early
- **Warning signs:** chronic fatigue, anxiety, depression and boredom



Stress is a reaction to a stimulus or demand that produces an elevated state of arousal or readiness: the greater the stimulus, the greater the stress reaction.

- A **slight stimulus**, such as giving a parking ticket, produces little change in a police officer's level of arousal.
- A **moderate demand**, such as fighting a single room fire, creates a stronger level of arousal in firefighters that makes them more alert and prepared for action.
- An **extreme level**, such as performing CPR on a two-year-old child, having shots fired at you or working at a major disaster, can disturb your thinking, emotions and physiological responses.

Emergency personnel benefit from a moderate amount of stress arousal: It enhances performance and health. However, if it becomes prolonged or excessive, stress levels reach a "maximum effective arousal" point, and health and performance deteriorates. At an extreme level, stress produces harmful effects that can negatively alter your career and your life.



Severe cases can cause considerable damage and require medical and psychological professional care.

### 3. Critical Incident Stress: Normal

A healthy person's painful response to an abnormal event

- Sometimes called "traumatic stress"
- Caused by exposure to horrible, overwhelming, frightening, threatening or disgusting events that are way beyond ordinary experiences, even for emergency personnel
- Can have physical, emotional, intellectual or behavioral symptoms
- Most people recover from critical incident stress and remain healthy and productive

If symptoms last longer than four weeks, the normal critical incident stress reaction may turn into a much more serious problem called PTSD.



#### 4. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): **Destructive**

**A condition characterized by an extreme physical and emotional response to a traumatic event**

- The event that triggered the stress reaction, or simply extreme or unresolved critical incident stress, is the starting point of PTSD.
- PTSD is abnormal. About 10% of the general population develops it over a lifetime. However, between 15% and 30% of emergency personnel develop it in their career.
- Its diagnosis requires that symptoms last longer than 30 days.

##### **Those suffering from PTSD:**

- Feel "stuck." They see, hear, feel, smell and taste the event repeatedly.
- Can have disturbing thoughts, dreams and nightmares.
- Avoid any reminders of the incident.
- Are over-aroused and anticipate a repetition of the terrible event.
- Develop significant changes to normal life pursuits (e.g., a police officer, paramedic or firefighter might become fanatically protective of his or her child after exposure to a gruesome child murder case).
- **Require professional treatment.**



PTSD

Developing PTSD is not because of some innate weakness of mind or character. People develop PTSD when a complex combination of factors occurs. Some of those factors include:

- The severity of the critical incident.
- A long duration of exposure.
- Significant hands-on contact with human misery and gory sights, sounds, smells and sensations.
- Frequent exposure to horrific events considered outside the range of normal human experience.
- Concurrent stressors (e.g., pregnancy, family illness or death, financial worries).
- A highly anxious personality.
- Severe traumatic events in childhood.
- Intense feelings of guilt or responsibility.
- Severe personal loss (e.g., death of a colleague).
- Feeling "outside" a person's own body or "in a movie" during the traumatic event.
- Isolation from caring, supportive family members or friends.
- A lack of immediate crisis support services.
- The absence of professional care.



## Sources of Stress

Police, fire-rescue and emergency medical personnel face many sources of stress. Stress reactions are very personal. What impacts one person may not bother another. Being aware of potential stressors may help us avoid some of them.

### Personal Causes of Stress

- Personal beliefs that conflict with reality
- High need to be in control
- Strong need to be needed by others
- Disappointment and loss of interest in job
- Willingness to take serious or dangerous risks
- A drive toward immediate satisfaction
- Excessively high personal standards and goals
- High need for exciting activity

### Family-Related Causes of Stress

- Death, serious illness, accidents or conflict
- Differences in values, needs and goals
- Child-rearing issues or difficult or demanding children
- Important decisions made without the approval of family members
- Financial difficulties
- Differences or inequalities in household responsibilities





- Administration hassles and poor leadership
- Demanding bosses or too many bosses
- Poor internal communications
- Lack of feedback from leaders
- Conflict with colleagues
- Shift work
- Low pay and poor advancement
- No or limited health and other benefits
- Work overload
- Boredom
- Uncertain job future
- Frustrating contacts with the public
- Responsibility for the lives, health and safety of others
- Personal danger from equipment or speed to a scene

### Traumatic Stress Events: The "Terrible 10"

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1 Line-of-duty death   | 7 Deaths or serious injuries to children    |
| 2 Serious injury to a colleague                              | 8 Knowing the victims personally            |
| 3 Suicide of a colleague                                     | 9 Events with excessive media coverage      |
| 4 Killing or wounding a colleague or an innocent person      | 10 Any unusual or extremely stressing event |
| 5 Disaster work  |   |
| 6 Events with extreme personal threat to emergency personnel |   |

Emergency personnel reactions to stress vary from person to person. The most common signs of stress are listed below. Not all signs of distress appear in each person.

## General Stress Reactions

- Preparations for fleeing or fighting
- Increased alertness
- Dilated pupils
- Rapid mental review of past experiences
- Intensified listening
- Aggressive stance
- Increased breathing and heart rate
- Yawning (body uses more oxygen when stressed)
- Increased anger and irritability
- Brain, heart, lungs and large muscle groups activated (while other body functions slow down)

## Moderate Levels of Stress

- Easily stimulated emotions
- Irritability
- Anger
- Frustration
- Emotional outbursts
- Poor problem-solving and decision-making
- Feelings of depression
- Increase in risk-taking
- Loss of attention and concentration
- Forgetfulness
- Increased use of alcohol
- Withdrawal from others



- Intense depression
- Paranoia
- Chronic irritability
- Negative alterations in physical and mental health
- Significant negative changes in personality
- Thoughts of suicide
- Loss of objectivity
- Extreme frustration
- Destructive changes in relationships with family, friends and colleagues
- Dramatic changes in performance

## Stress Reactions at Their Worst

- Loss of control
- Alcohol abuse
- Severe depression
- Rage reactions
- Homicidal feelings
- Striking out at others
- Physical breakdowns
- Mental breakdowns
- Suicide actions



## Dangerous Signs of Stress

These signs require immediate, corrective action since they threaten the health and safety of emergency personnel.

### Physical

- Chest pain or difficulty breathing
- High blood pressure
- Collapse from exhaustion
- Unusual heartbeat patterns
- Signs of severe shock (weak pulse, pale color, excessive sweating, rapid breathing)
- Extreme dehydration
- Dizziness
- Vomiting or having blood in feces

### Mental

- Decreased alertness and concentration
- Disoriented and confused (with time, location and who he or she is)
- Seriously disrupted and slow thinking
- Racing thoughts
- Difficulties making decisions requiring immediate attention
- Cannot recall names of familiar equipment or people

- Panic reactions
- Numb, shock-like state
- General loss of control of emotions
- Phobic reactions
- Rage reactions and exaggerated emotions
- Overwhelming sadness that blocks action

### Behavioral

- Excessive crying
- Body shakes
- Facial tremors
- Wringing hands
- Withdrawal from others and hiding
- Violent physical reactions
- Excessive anger at minor inconveniences
- Excessive pacing/activity
- Uncontrolled laughing in the face of serious threats
- Meaningless repeated actions
- Significant changes in speech patterns (slurred, rapid or unintelligible)



**Suddenness**

Surprise causes more stress

**Intensity**

How awful the experience is

**Degree**

How widespread the impact is

**Duration**

The longer the exposure, the greater the harm

**Frequency**

The more exposure to horrible events, the greater the potential for a problem

**Training, education, experience**

Helps build resilience

**Resource availability**

The more resources, the better you cope

**Positive mental attitude**

Most important in stress control



## Short-Term Event

### Before and During the Event

- Prepare for emergencies by training and drilling.
- Prepare equipment and maintain its readiness.
- Gather information before deployment and update it frequently.
- Follow legitimate directions of knowledgeable leaders.
- Take breaks for rest and nourishment.
- Do not take personal blame for tragedies.

### After the Event

- Ready equipment for the next call.
- Take care of yourself.
- Avoid alcohol. It worsens stress reactions.
- Eat nutritious foods, get plenty of fluids, and avoid or limit caffeine intake.
- Do physical exercise to help lower stress reactions.
- Participate in an operations review.
- Learn what you can from the experience.
- Talk about the incident with trusted friends, colleagues or leaders.



### Prolonged Event

#### Time Management

- Orient crews to the time every 20 minutes. Time awareness decreases fatigue, mistakes and injuries.
- Let emergency crews know approximately how long they will work and the objectives of their mission.

#### Rest and Sleep

- 30 minutes of rest for every two hours of work
- Minimum of four hours of sleep in a 24-hour period
- Gradual work increases/decreases
- Crew rotations when possible
- 12-hour shifts as the maximum
- More rest required after four days
- Increased break frequency if encountering extremely stressful stimuli or in extremely hot or cold conditions

#### Nutrition

**Eat** whole grain breads, fruits and vegetables, dairy products and granola bars.

**Avoid** caffeine (coffee, tea, chocolate, etc.) and soft drinks (choose water instead).

**Do not drink alcohol** for at least three days after a traumatic experience.





No doubt, organizations play a role in stress control, but nothing is as important as the role the individual plays in controlling his or her own stress. Emergency personnel must accept primary responsibility for their own health.

### 1. Diet

Poor nutrition and bad eating habits can compromise performance, stamina and stress tolerance. Caffeine, alcohol, refined sugars, fats and excessive salt elevate stress levels and should be avoided or limited.

#### Caffeine

- Elevates blood pressure and heart rate.
- Increases the need for oxygen.
- Stimulates the cardiac muscle and central nervous system.
- Causes nervousness, sleeplessness and irritability.



- Negatively impacts performance, behavior, judgment and physical coordination.
- Reduces levels of vitamins B and C, making the body more vulnerable to stress and disease.
- Suppresses rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, which is vital to your ability to process traumatic experiences by natural means.



### QuickNote

If emergency personnel need to drink alcohol or use other drugs to manage the stress of the job, they are in need of professional help

## 2. Exercise

- Increases muscle strength, lung capacity and physical stamina.
- Lowers blood pressure and increases blood flow to tissues.
- Improves sleep.
- Lowers weight and cholesterol.
- Reduces the potential of injuries and their severity, should they occur.
- Reduces the level of stress chemicals in the body.



- Be active and enjoy the exercise you choose.
- Follow a physician's advice on exercise.
- Start slowly and build up.
- Exercise for 30 minutes every day.
- Rest properly and get plenty of sleep.
- If exercise causes pain, stop and get it checked.
- Warm up and stretch before exercise.
- Purchase the right footwear and equipment.

### 3. Smoking

- Please stop! If you've never smoked, do not start!
- Smoking has major health risks and is a self-destructive behavior.
- Like caffeine, nicotine enhances stress reactions.
- Nicotine depletes vitamins C and E, increasing the body's vulnerability to stress-related diseases.
- Chewing tobacco is not a good substitute for smoking; it presents similar health risks as smoking tobacco.



Police, fire-rescue and emergency medical personnel who work with a positive mental attitude reach their goals, feeling happy and satisfied about their jobs. Think negatively, and you will feel negative. Think positively, and you will feel positive.

- You make valuable contributions to people.
- Stress is a challenge. Overcome it.
- Stress is controllable.
- Find humor where you can every day.
- Have a life beyond the job.
- Clear thinking keeps emotions controlled and useful.
- Do not jump to conclusions. Review the facts first.
- Think first and then take action.
- Self-blame and guilt distort reality.
- Admit mistakes, apologize, correct what you can and move on.
- Decide which battles are worth a fight.
- Never bring shame on your family, your unit or yourself.
- Follow your conscience. You will have less regrets.



Spirituality or personal beliefs are effective in stress management. People who believe in a caring God, a force or a power beyond themselves tend to cope with high levels of stress for longer times. Beliefs, prayer, meditation, contemplation and religious ceremonies are important for health.

## 6. Relaxation

Relaxation does not mean sitting and resting. It is a deliberate and purposeful quieting of the mind and body. Relaxation stimulates chemicals in the body that neutralize the harmful chemicals produced by excessive or prolonged stress. Here are some popular relaxation techniques.

### Deep Breathing

Deep breathing is one of the most effective relaxation techniques for emergency personnel. It can be performed anywhere, anytime. Here is how to do it.

#### 1. Start with three very deep breaths.

- Inhale the deepest breath possible through the nose. Hold it for five seconds and release it forcefully through pursed lips.
- Pause for five to 10 seconds between each very deep breath, breathing normally while resting.
- Relax the body as much as possible.



- **volume (about one-half of a very deep breath).**
- Inhale through the nose and hold for up to 10 seconds.
- Continue to relax the body.
- Exhale forcefully through the mouth with pursed lips.
- Rest and breathe normally between breaths.

### 3. Finish with three normal-sized, but full, breaths.

- Inhale through the nose. Hold for 10-15 seconds.
- Exhale forcefully through the mouth with pursed lips.

### Progressive Muscle Relaxation Training

In progressive muscle relaxation, muscle groups are tensed for a few seconds then relaxed. The tension "fools" the brain by signaling a too tense condition. Relaxation chemicals are then released by the body to counteract the tension.

1. Slowly squeeze one muscle group.
2. Squeeze to a point of maximum tension, never to a point of pain.
3. Hold the muscle tightly for 10-15 seconds.
4. Notice the feeling and location of the tension.
5. Slowly and gradually let go of the tension in the muscle.
6. Notice how the muscle feels as you release the tension. Look for signs of increased lightness or heaviness, warmth or coolness, or tingling.



**Important:** Skip any muscle that is injured.

- 1** Squeeze your hand into a tight fist. Repeat with the opposite hand.
- 2** Bend your right arm at the elbow; bring it up to your chest. Repeat with your left arm.
- 3** Extend both arms out in front of you, reaching as far as you can.
- 4** Tilt your head back toward the ceiling.
- 5** Tilt your head forward toward your chest.
- 6** Lift your shoulders up toward your ears.
- 7** Lean your chest forward, your shoulders back and arch your back.
- 8** Push your stomach out, making it hard.
- 9** Squeeze your buttocks tightly together.
- 10** Press your knees together.
- 11** Point your toes toward the ceiling.
- 12** Wrinkle your forehead (frown or look up to the ceiling).
- 13** Shut your eyes tightly.
- 14** Press your lips together and smile widely.
- 15** Clench your teeth.

Visual imagery is a relaxation technique that uses a person's ability to daydream. It can calm and quiet the mind and the body.

- Find a quiet place free of distractions.
- Choose a comfortable position and close your eyes.
- Let your body relax and remain quiet.
- Let your mind imagine yourself in a pleasant place.
- Imagine doing something relaxing and enjoyable (walking in the woods, resting on a beach, etc.).
- Make your special scene come alive in your mind. Add sights, colors, sounds, sensations (warmth or a breeze on your skin, etc.), smells and tastes to your images.
- Let your imagination go to a peaceful and relaxed state. Keep your body still and let go of all muscle tension.
- You can resume routine activities in about 10 minutes.

**Biofeedback, Meditation and Hypnosis**

Biofeedback, meditation and hypnosis are excellent stress-reduction tools, but they require some training beyond the scope of this guide.

**7. Have a Life Beyond the Job**

- Balance home life, recreation and work.
- Care for your family, your spouse, your children, your friends and yourself.
- Have friends who do not do emergency work. People outside of the job can offer support, security and new energy.





- Talk to trusted people to stay healthy, especially when things get rough (e.g., friends, family, a clergy person, a professional).
- Do not describe gory details of an event to your family or friends. Tell them, instead, about your reactions, issues and concerns.
- Talking to others helps you feel normal, lowers tension and helps you make decisions.

### 9. Avoid False Stress Cures

- Alcohol, recreational drugs or other substances of abuse
- Freeze reactions (People become so fearful of making a mistake or getting hurt that they choose to do nothing. They choose to have no contact with people.)
- Avoidance of distressing circumstances in hopes that they will just go away
- Denial of pain and problems
- Mind games and excessive joking
- Acting arrogant to disguise one's insecurities



S	Sensible eating
T	Time to enjoy life
R	Rest and relaxation
E	Exercise and education
S	Social support of family/colleagues/friends
S	Satisfying expressions of self and spirituality

## Conditions Requiring Professional Assistance

The existence of one or more of the following conditions may indicate that a person needs professional assistance. Seek professional care as soon as possible.

- Chronic sleep disturbance
- Chronic feelings of depression
- Frequent crying spells
- Feeling generally unhappy for long periods
- Feeling confused, lost, insecure, anxious or fearful
- Inability to stop thinking about painful issues
- Seriously declining job performance
- Frequent loss of emotional control
- Chronic anger or rage
- Frequent deep sighs
- Seriously troubled relationships with family
- Feeling paranoid
- Significant loss of interest in usual pursuits
- Withdrawal from others
- Suicidal or homicidal thoughts or actions (immediate professional care is required)

## STRESS MANAGEMENT FOR EMERGENCY PERSONNEL

This guide addresses stress management for law enforcement, fire service and emergency rescue personnel who constantly encounter stressful situations that are not experienced by the general public.

- What is stress?
- Normal and destructive stress
- Sources and signs of stress
- Stress survival skills
- False stress cures
- Stress control strategies



Developed in collaboration with  
the International Critical Incident  
Stress Foundation  
[www.icisf.org](http://www.icisf.org)

**Disclaimer:** This guide presents only general, commonsense guidelines to assist people in a suicidal crisis. These guidelines provide direction in estimating if a person is likely to commit suicide and instructions for offering temporary support during an urgent situation. This book is not a substitute for proper crisis intervention training. In addition, the principles in this guide are not a form of psychotherapy or a substitute for psychotherapy. The suggestions presented in this guide are not intended to cure psychological disorders. The user should keep in mind that people in a suicidal crisis, more often than not, need the services of professional mental health personnel. When in doubt, always refer a person to a professional for further evaluation.

**The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**

A 24-hour, toll-free, confidential suicide prevention hotline available to anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress: **800-273-TALK (8255)**

[www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

**International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF)**

[www.icisf.org](http://www.icisf.org)

**Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA)**

[www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)

**Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Alliance**

[www.ptsdalliance.org](http://www.ptsdalliance.org)

**The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**

[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

**The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)**

[www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)



### QuickRead

For more information on living a healthier life, refer to these QuickSeries® guides:

**Managing Your Stress, Smart Nutrition 101, Healthy Sleep and Your Personal Wellness Coach**

