**6 ways to beat burnout in a police officer**

**Teaching yourself to recognize and manage burnout is imperative to the overall happiness and stability in your job and life — teaching others in law enforcement is key to the success of the profession** *Article updated October 9, 2018 Police One Magazine*

In our experience, the term “burnout” has a particularly negative connotation in the law enforcement profession. Yet in other professions — especially those where you become a professional caretaker of others — burnout is widely accepted as a reality.

As LEOs, you are also caretakers since you are protectors of justice, civil rights, and the public who depend on you. It is your responsibility to provide service to those who directly or indirectly call upon your help and assistance. You help and, as in any helping profession, are [highly susceptible to burnout](https://www.policeone.com/health-fitness/articles/7119422-9-ways-to-tell-if-youre-a-law-enforcement-burnout/).

Your biggest risk of burnout is the near constant exposure to the “flight or fight response” inherent to the job. Here are common causes of adrenaline spikes:

* Running code, hot or lights and sirens
* Engaging and managing the agitated, angry, and irrational
* Any other of your responsibilities that can cause you to become hypervigilant

Add the very real tension of the politics and stresses inside the office and a dangerous mix is formed. The pressures and demands of your job can take a toll on your emotional wellbeing and quality of life and burnout will often follow.

**WHAT IS BURNOUT (AND HOW DOES BURNOUT OCCUR)?**

Burnout has been defined as a depletion of oneself by exhausting physical and mental resources, excessively working toward unrealistic expectations that are self-imposed or societally expected. It begins with prolonged levels of job stress that produce feelings of tension, irritability, and fatigue until the worker falls into apathy, cynicism, or rigidity as a defense mechanism.

Burnout leaves someone emotionally exhausted and, among workers who do “people work” reduces or completely eliminates enjoyment or any sense of accomplishment. Perversely, the pain of professional burnout usually bleeds into other aspects of living.

Being exposed to repetitive stress leads to changes in the brain chemistry and density that affect emotional and physical health. Most are familiar with the idea of [PTSD](https://www.policeone.com/ptsd/articles/379161006-How-to-cope-with-5-of-the-most-common-symptoms-of-PTSD/) and understand a LEO’s exposure to trauma can lead to it, but it is a myth that one big traumatic event is usually the precipitator of PTSD. In reality it is repetitive stressful events that cause burnout, depression, anxiety, and PTSD.

Repetitive stress in the law enforcement workplace can be:

* A lack of control in your personal life because of the inability  to choose desired shifts or work hours and missing family events, holidays, and social opportunities repeatedly.
* Being isolated from family and friends from not working a “normal” work schedule and having to work overtime at a moment’s notice.
* An unsatisfying assignment or being passed over for a desired position.
* Exposure to work personalities that are toxic to the organization (peers, supervisors, or administrators).
* “Bureaucratic bullsh\*t” that inhibits doing the job effectively and efficiently.
* Extremes of activity ranging from boredom to chaos, and then back to boredom, very quickly.
* The “duality of mind” necessary to be polite, professional, and respectful to a citizen while at the same time knowing this encounter could be “the one” you suddenly need to take his life to protect your own.

**PAY ATTENTION TO YOURSELF**

Serious consequences can arise, if coping skills and techniques are not implemented to take care of yourself. It has been known for a long time in the medical community that stress threatens health by lowering the immune system with consequences ranging from susceptibility to the common cold, to cardiac problems, digestive issues, and even cancer.

With the return of our current veterans, more studies are being done on PTSD and medical researchers are finding severe burnout may be a precursor of PTSD. Most people believe PTSD results from a single emotionally overwhelming trauma but, while this does happen, it is as likely or more likely that the exposure to repetitive stress leads to [PTSD](https://www.policeone.com/health-fitness/articles/360840006-PTSD-quiz-Find-out-if-your-symptoms-qualify/).

Science is learning PTSD is an actual injury in the amygdala and other structures of the brain caused by the release of stress hormones. Knowing this, it is imperative officers be trained on the signs and causes of burnout, how to recognize it, and how to implement self-care techniques in order to reduce its occurrence.

**HOW TO MANAGE BURNOUT**

By engaging in preventative techniques, burnout can be avoided or caught at its earliest signs. Once you recognize it has begun to take hold some simple life changes can be made to reverse the effects. We practice (and teach):

1. **Have fun.**Play harder than you work, making sure pleasurable events in your life are just as intense as the seriousness of your job. Create time for laughter, fun, and excitement.
2. **Choose good people.**Surround yourself with positive people. Negative people feed you negative energy and become emotionally draining. Positive people generally have good coping skills and are better at problem-solving life’s stressors. They make you feel good when you are around them and positive experiences heal negative ones and give you energy to draw against when stress reappears.
3. **Work on resiliancy.**Identity your areas of repetitive stress and develop a plan to build better [resiliency](https://www.policeone.com/health-fitness/articles/470778006-Why-police-departments-need-to-recruit-for-resiliency/), coping skills, and a plan of attack to manage the stress.
4. **Eat better, drink less, move more.**Take care of your basic needs such as [eating healthy](https://www.policeone.com/health-fitness/articles/214141006-No-spit-in-this-food-4-great-on-duty-meals-cops-can-bring-from-home/), exercise, and getting enough sleep. Limit alcohol use since it is a depressant.
5. **Outside interests.**Have hobbies that are not related to the cop world to provide balance.
6. **Do good outside of law enforcement.**Volunteer in an organization where you know you are making a difference, that takes you away from the identity of a cop for a while.