



Health Check

A Publication of **NRI Community Services, Inc.**

As part of **Technical Assistance Consultation & Training Services (TACTS)**



Building Psychological Body Armor

Tips for a Healthier and Happier Life

Over the past six years, I've worked closely with many police officers and their family members here in Rhode Island. I've worked with officers at the beginning, middle and end of their careers and have observed certain characteristics, traits and issues, both positive and negative, that I'd like to share with you. These observations will help shed some light on the "nuts and bolts" of reaching retirement healthy and happy.

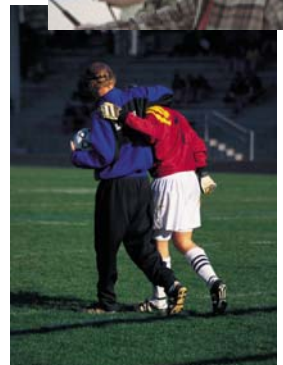
It's very common to become cynical and mistrusting of civilians if most of your on the job contacts are with individuals who either break the law or openly try to deceive or lie to you. After a while you may find yourself socializing only with other police officers and excluding most civilians from your life. Keep your civilian friends and contacts. Keeping your civilian relationships can restore your faith in mankind. Officers who kept their civilian contacts throughout their career have both a larger network of friends and a wider range of interests. You may also not be included in the camaraderie of the department upon your retirement (your civilian friends will still be there for you). This can be problematic for the officer who shaped their entire existence around being a police officer. They can end up being alone and isolated.

To further increase your connection to the positive happenings in the community, volunteer in your community (coaching, church, school, etc.) This also cuts down on the cynicism that may develop regarding civilians and provides you with satisfaction and accomplishment while helping others (you may not always get this at work).

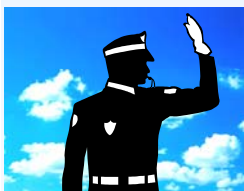
Stay physically fit! Heart disease, ulcers, stroke, workplace accidents, increased blood pressure and cholesterol are very prevalent in police officers. Staying active (walking, jogging, swimming, martial arts, weight lifting, etc.) will lower your risk of heart disease and reduce the dangerous effect of stress on your brain and body. Yes, research now tells us, without a doubt, that harmful stress can damage your heart, stomach, immune system and increase your risk of developing cancer.

Advice for Improved Health and Happiness

- Get dressed at work not at home. Officers who practice this step tell me that dressing at work helps them more easily switch into the role of father, mother, coach, etc. when they return home. Officers who are able to leave work at work are much happier and healthier.
- Continue with non-law enforcement hobbies. Hobbies like woodworking, auto mechanics, golf, landscaping, painting, photography, etc. help lower stress and give you a sense of control, accomplishment and satisfaction. Having a wide variety of hobbies will help you cope with critical incidents, as well as the day to day stressors of the job.
- Focus on what you can control (home life) not what you can't control (office politics, promotions, etc.) Officers who are more heavily focused on work, actually have less job satisfaction and more stress in their lives.
- Talk with your significant other. Most significant others want to be involved in your life – which includes work. If you do not openly talk about your reactions, concerns and worries, about what you see, hear and experience on a daily basis, you will begin to destroy your relationship with the ones you love. Let them in!
- Do not be overly controlling with your kids, spouse and other people in your life! Seeing the dangers of society, as each of you do every day, and



Reaching out for help is a sign of strength, not weakness. If you or one of your family members are in need of mental health or substance abuse treatment, contact one of your peer support counselors or give us a call at **235-7120** for a confidential consultation. We are available 24 hrs. a day/7 days per week.



(Continued on page 2)

Peer support counselors are specially trained police officers who provide support and assistance to colleagues during personal and professional crisis.

Training Police Officers Throughout New England



NRI Community Services is an accredited, progressive, non-profit, community agency providing mental health, substance abuse, and elder case management, education and training, employment, and housing services. NRICS has received national recognition for many of its programs based on client outcomes.

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Tips Continued...

experiencing a lack of control you can sometimes feel due to the unpredictability of police work, can make you over control your family at home (e.g., excessive rules, early curfews). Adolescents will become defiant if they are restricted unnecessarily. While they need to respect house rules, try to cut them some slack once in a while and don't forget that they need you more, not less, as they enter adolescence.

- If you are a parent and struggling with discipline issues, as we all do, purchase the video *1-2-3 Magic* by Thomas Phalen. No parent should be without this tape!!!
- Try to eat meals together at least three times a week at the table as a family, not in front of the TV. Research shows that this simple step brings families much closer together.
- Physical discipline is not needed! It *always harms* relationships. Just because we might have been disciplined physically as kids, does not make it right. If you feel yourself losing control of your temper, please seek out one of your department's peer support counselors – they can help.
- A common occurrence in the police community is relationship difficulties between male officers and their sons. Pick your battles! Even though they are boys, they still need to be hugged and told of how proud you are of them. Try to be positive. Accept them for who they are and you will reap the benefit of having a great relationship with your kids. Make a special effort to play a game or engage in an activity with them each week (checkers, raking leaves, making puzzles, playing catch, bike riding, etc.)
- Researchers at London's University College have found that drinking black tea soon after experiencing a stressful event can reduce overall stress and help the person get over the event more quickly!
- Sometimes home life can seem boring in comparison to the excitement of police work. This is because your body pumps out more of the "fight or flight" chemical called adrenaline while you are at work, which can change your perceptions (you're funnier, sharper and others appear more attractive). When you return home your body will readjust by sending out sedating chemicals which cause feelings of boredom, apathy and disinterest. Not understanding this normal chemical reaction, many officers feel it is the relationship that is making them feel this way. If you can exercise as soon after your shift as possible, you can readjust this chemical reaction back to normal making yourself more alive and energetic at home. Read *Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement* by Gilmartin for further survival tips in this area.
- Cut down on excessive spending. Sometimes after surviving a close call some officers begin to spend like there is no tomorrow, rationalizing that they need to enjoy all life's pleasures as tomorrow may never come. This thinking can lead to high credit card debt, expensive purchases, gambling, and high risk behaviors which will most definitely cause chaos on the home front.
- Take vacations and schedule dates with your significant other. You should plan for these events ahead of time or they have a tendency to not happen. Use a calendar for this planning.
- Keep a picture on your desk or in your wallet of yourself and/or your family on vacation. Look at it when you feel anger or increased stress at work. It will help you calm down and remember what is most important in life
- Cut down on foods which contain hydrogenated oils and high fructose corn syrup (crackers, cookies, puddings, desserts). These ingredients in food are highly destructive to your blood vessels. Eat less sugar, more fruit and vegetables and more protein (especially fish, chicken and pork (the good fats). Select Subway over McDonald's! Increase your fiber content to 20 to 25 grams a day. All of the tips above can significantly reduce your chance of having a heart attack, stroke or developing cancer.

The good news is that it is never too late to change. Make a commitment to implement one or two of these changes over the next couple of weeks and you may be pleasantly surprised at the outcome.

Richard Crino, RN, CTR

NRI Community Services, Inc.

Let yourself laugh more

The old adage that "laughter is the best medicine" is sound advice when it comes to coping with life's distresses. Laughter relaxes muscles, lowers blood pressure and eases mental tension. Researchers are also showing that laughter may actually reduce levels of hormones that trigger the stress response and suppress immunity. William Fry, a psychiatrist with Stanford University, points out that, according to *thrive@health* magazine, "laughter stimulates the production of hormones called catecholamines, which are thought to cause the brain to release endorphins, the same stress-reducers triggered by exercise."

A good laugh frequently will diffuse an otherwise stressful situation and reduce discomfort. Next time you are in a high stress situation look for the humor in it or imagine how your favorite comedian might react.

Research has shown that laughter is beneficial for improving one's perspective on life, for managing pain and for coping with unusual stress.



By A. Christopher Hammon from *Sleep and Stress on the Job*