

SAFLEO Issue Brief Series #5

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Spotlight on  
**Workplace Burnout**  
for Law Enforcement  
Officers

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## Policing is a high stress job.

High levels of stress result from being forward facing to the public, responding to distress calls, increasing expectations and job duties, working more hours because of staffing issues, seeing violence and crime, and putting your life on the line every day. Contemporary issues like lack of support or perceived lack of support from community members and leaders and social media interaction have escalated the stress that officers experience on the job. This high stress level can carry over into officers' personal lives.

## Common stressors

- Interpersonal pressure from interactions with colleagues or community members
- Always being “on” and in the public eye
- Exposure to trauma and secondary trauma
- Exposure to risk and injury (risk of workplace injury or loss of life)
- Emotional demands of policing
- Disconnect between workforce and agency leadership
- Problems in personal life
- Lack of training opportunities
- Lack of promotional opportunities
- Poor internal communications
- Underfunded budgets
- Low pay scales
- Poor equipment and/or lack of equipment
- Staffing shortages impacting forced overtime, vacations, and workload
- Unpredictable demands during the workday
- Physical demands of policing
- Demands of shift work
- Bureaucratic processes and oversight
- High turnover

## Burnout is one possible outcome of a high stress job.

Workplace burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress from one's employment.<sup>1</sup> It occurs when you feel overwhelmed, emotionally drained, and unable to meet constant work demands.<sup>2</sup> Symptoms of workplace burnout include being exhausted, indifferent, stressed, cynical, and overextended. Research has demonstrated that long-term, unresolved workplace burnout is a chronic disease and a major health concern. Burnout impacts morale and can spread among employees. In a job such as law enforcement, officers are especially at risk for cynicism or negativity. This could be due to more frequent exposure to negative or traumatic events, which tends to affect overall well-being more than positive experiences. When dealing with a traumatic event at work, some officers try to lock the memory away or forget about it. Others do not discuss work when they are at home, leaving their partners unaware of the stressors that they are experiencing at work. It is important to mitigate the issues of burnout at both the individual and agency levels.

1. Merriam-Webster defines workplace burnout as “exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration.”

2. Burnout Prevention and Treatment—[HelpGuide.org](https://www.helpguide.org)

# ● ● ● Countering Burnout at the Individual Level

If you think that you are experiencing workplace burnout, it is important to reflect on how you feel and what may be causing those feelings. Identifying the issue and getting support to address it is important to improving your work environment and habits.

## Are you feeling emotionally drained or mentally unwell?

- Focus on exercise and a healthy diet and prioritize sleep.
- Limit your consumption of alcohol, which may cause you to feel exhausted.
- Engage in healthy and positive activities that you enjoy.
- Set up a time to speak with a counselor, family or friend, trusted colleague, or peer about your feelings.
- Get a physical check-up to ensure that the way you are feeling is not a reflection of the onset of a medical condition (such as high blood pressure or anxiety).

## Do you experience nausea or dread at work or when thinking about work?

- Nauseousness and dread are common reactions to psychological stress. Try to pinpoint the source of what's making you feel ill. Is there something specific that is causing this stress?
- Set boundaries that work for you, such as waiting to check your emails until you are working as opposed to first thing in the morning.
- Make sure that you are making time for activities that you enjoy when you are off work.
- Set up a time to speak with a therapist or counselor to identify additional strategies to alleviate the stress that is causing you physical reactions to psychological stress.

## Are you unable to sleep?

- Evaluate your job stress, home-life stress, schedule, health conditions, medications, the environmental factors in your bedroom, and the amount of caffeine that you consume to assess what contributes to your sleeplessness.
- Obtain 7 to 9 hours of sleep.
- Establish consistent sleep and wake times.
- Adjust environmental factors in your bedroom by using a white noise machine and keeping the room cool and dark.
- Speak with your physician to identify courses of treatment and rule out the onset of health conditions that may be making it more difficult to sleep.

**Are you constantly fighting off illness?**

- High stress levels can impact your immune system.
- Repeated illness can be related to a vitamin deficiency, dehydration, problems with your immune system, inadequate hygiene, or other medical explanations.
- A health care provider can help you develop an action plan.

**Do you misuse or abuse alcohol, medication, or other substances?**

- A first step to reducing misuse of alcohol, medications, or other substances is to set limits. Do an honest self-assessment of how often you use chemical substances to deal with stress or to relax.
- Identify and manage your triggers. Look for people, places, and/or situations that may lead to increased consumption of alcohol or other substances. Run through mental scenarios about what to do when faced with these temptations so that you can be prepared to take steps to avoid them.
- Take medications as directed by packaging and/or a physician's orders.
- Speak with a health care provider or counselor about strategies to reduce consumption of alcohol, medication, or other substances.

**Do you feel like your work does not matter?**

- Assess why you feel this way to determine if you are lacking purpose and fulfillment or if you do not enjoy your roles and responsibilities. These are two different responses. You need to be able to identify the issues in order to address them.
- Discuss your concerns with your supervisor or a peer.
- Speak to a counselor about how you are feeling.
- Remember and reconnect with what led you to this career. Think about specific times when you have helped people.

**Do you feel like you are not personally achieving your best?**

- Try to identify why you feel this way.
- Look at areas of your life that are less fulfilling as opportunities. The end of a relationship or struggling to pay down debt does not make it a failure. Recognize that many people experience these challenges.
- Build your identity around your personal interests, engage in activities that you enjoy, and focus on positivity. You are more than a law enforcement professional.

**Are you feeling alienated or ostracized in the workplace?**

- These feelings can impact your self-worth and belief in your own likeability and capability. They can lead to feeling shame, anxiety, isolation, or depression. It can also trigger responses where you feel the need to reduce your effort or to overperform in the work environment.
- Assess why you may be feeling alienated in the workplace.
- If you feel like you are being bullied or harassed, consider speaking to someone outside of the workplace—a counselor or a peer who can provide you confidentiality and support. You may decide to speak to human resources.
- Review your organization's anti-bullying and harassment policy. Consider if this is an appropriate option based on your situation.

## How can agencies support their employees to counter workplace burnout?

- Ensure that supervisors set the tone for the balance of work/home life by promoting and modeling healthy behaviors.
- Consider adding incentives to encourage exercise, healthy sleep habits, healthful nutrition, meaningful nonwork activities, and/or financial wellness.
- Destigmatize help-seeking.
- Provide employees with information about self-assessing their level of engagement with the organization and opportunities to increase their engagement.
- Provide options for getting help, including mental health screenings, physical health screenings, an Employee Assistance Program, and other resources.

When looking for ways to mitigate the effects of workplace burnout, it is important to consider an individual's out-of-work environment, such as their home life and interpersonal relationships when off duty. It is not uncommon for officers to experience dissatisfaction with interpersonal relationships when partners, families, or friends do not understand the officer's professional role or know how best to offer support. Having personal relationships outside of your law enforcement circle encourages meaningful conversations that are unrelated to law enforcement. Resources for officers and their families can help to bridge this gap, including department chaplaincy programs and faith-based or peer support teams.

Agencies should adopt policies that outline established methods for supervisors to utilize when approaching officers to have a conversation about burnout. Methods might include creating a process that enables supervisors to check in regularly with officers who may be exhibiting signs of burnout. A flexible work benefit counseling program can be encouraged at times when burnout seems likely. Other strategies might include providing wellness programs and offering training in relaxation, mindfulness, meditation, and other strategies for reducing stress.

Agencies must also consider department policies, as well as local and state funding requirements, that may impact the role of an officer. Advocacy efforts may be warranted to ensure limited budgets or unrealistic expectations are not weighing down our officers. Our communities depend on the well-being of our officers, not only for their own safety but for the safety of the public. Preventing burnout must not fall exclusively on the officers' shoulders. It is everyone's job to help improve their well-being and promote a positive working environment.



## My Local Resources

## Resources

- Primary care physician
- Culturally competent clinician (in person or online)
- Professionally led support group
- Peer support group
- Employee Assistance Program
- Agency chaplain
- Clergy
- Supervisor
- Human resources
- Trusted colleagues
- Friends or family members
- Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: Call 988
- Crisis Text Line: Text "BLUE" to 741741

## SUICIDE IS PREVENTABLE, AND IT STARTS WITH YOU!

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