

Mindfulness for Police Officers
Mariya Dvoskina, M.A., John Nicoletti, Ph.D, ABPP

The notion of mindful acceptance, or “mindfulness” has gained growing support and popularity within psychological circles as well as within the general public. While practicing mindfulness is often a component of evidence-based psychotherapy approaches, it is also something that can be effectively utilized outside of therapy, at home, or even on the job. Most commonly, mindfulness is defined as the state of being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present moment (Brown & Ryan, 2003). This approach suggests that the attempt to control or fight against your internal experience will only lead to more suffering, and instead focuses on the importance of acknowledgement and acceptance of painful emotions and thoughts (Bishop et al., 2004). While mindfulness is not a new concept per se (the notion of accepting pain as part of life can be traced back to Buddhist philosophy), it is one that has recently gained more traction within the realm of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). Recent studies have shown mindfulness-based treatments, such as ACT, are effective in treating a myriad of psychological disorders, including Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Walser & Hayes, 2006). Given the efficacy and broad utility of practicing mindfulness, it is not surprising that psychologists have begun exploring how this approach can be useful to those individuals who work in high stress occupations such as law enforcement.

Police officers are at a higher risk of experiencing stress when compared to other occupational groups (Williams, Ciarrochi, & Deane, 2010). Police officers are frequently exposed to violence, suffering, and death, which are just a few factors that may contribute to higher stress (Finn, Talucci, & Wood, 2000). In addition, a perception of negative public opinion and negative portrayals in the media may also contribute to higher police stress. While police and other first responders experience some of the highest levels of stress, they also often unknowingly engage in coping strategies that are ineffective (Williams et al., 2010). For example, law enforcement officers may often use experiential avoidance and thought suppression as a maladaptive coping strategy. Officers may also have difficulty identifying their feelings in the present moment (Williams et al., 2010). Furthermore, the cultural climate within police organizations may contribute to normalizing these types of poor coping strategies. A mindfulness approach is an alternative to these generally ineffective coping mechanisms, and can provide officers with a tool they can use to decrease stress, improve sleep, and strengthen their overall physical and mental health.

While a majority of research on law enforcement and mindfulness focuses on the utility of engaging in mindfulness practice in the aftermath of a traumatic event (e.g. Chopko, & Schwartz 2013), other research points to the importance of engaging in mindfulness practice on a continuous basis. In fact, in a longitudinal study of police officer recruits, Williams et al., (2010), found that mindfulness is one of the key variables in predicting wellbeing and mental health. Their findings also suggest that those officers who tended to be more mindful overall experienced less depression and improved mental health. Thus, utilizing mindfulness can become a form of adaptation to stress and negative experiences.

In addition to the above-mentioned benefits of mindfulness, practicing mindfulness over a sustained period may offer increasing effectiveness. Like eating well and practicing appropriate sleep hygiene, mindfulness is simply a good habit in which to engage. Similar to other good habits, it requires practice and commitment. Officers can use mindfulness prior, during, and after a stressful incident to increase their resilience and reduce their stress level. While there may be contexts in which mindfulness may not be applicable, such as engaging in an appropriate avoidance of feelings, "problems tend to arise when police rigidly attempt to avoid all unpleasant feelings and experience" (Williams et al., 2010). Mindfulness overall, practicing mindfulness is another psychological tool which officers can choose to utilize to reduce stress and build resilience. The utility of mindfulness practice should continue to be explored in its application not only for police officers, but other high stress professions such as fire fighters and astronauts.

References

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