

# | WELLNESS |

## BURNOUT IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

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### What is Burnout?

**B**urnout is the mental or physical collapse caused by long-term chronic stress or doing work that no longer feels connected to your life's purpose. Over time, it causes you to run out of energy and leads to extreme exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy. It can be debilitating mentally and emotionally and can flow over into the rest of your life outside of work, as well as affect your physical health.

In May 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>1</sup> added burnout to the International Classification of Diseases handbook, where they describe it as an "occupational phenomenon," not a medical condition, that results from unmanaged workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. They go on to define it as characterized by three dimensions:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- Increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job
- Reduced professional efficacy

### Stress or Burnout?

To understand burnout, we need to first understand stress. The first thing to know is that although we often associate stress

with something negative, stress is something we need in order to function well. Knowing this allows us to understand that stress has a function in our well-being and ability to engage with our work. Stress is there to fuel our focus and provides the energy that allows us to do our work. It's often what we associate with engagement, focus and excitement. It's the adrenaline that fuels our activities. But the key is that it doesn't threaten us.

Stress is also there to help us in bad moments. It is our survival mechanism when our body engages the fight-or-flight response (getting our bodies ready to react to the danger by either facing it or by running away) in the face of a situation of adversity or danger. The stress response activates our system to deal with this. The key is that once the situation is dealt with, our system comes back to normal. The problem becomes when we deal with stress that does not get resolved or becomes long term and chronic, which leads us to feel out of control of our lives.

Our bodies are not designed for chronic stress, and if we experience it for a long time, it can have serious negative effects on our bodies. Our bodies are also not wired for today's types of stressors, which are not immediate survival stressors but often related to our day-to-day tasks. Our brain does not recognize the difference between a stressor that is life-threatening and

### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> "Burn-out an 'occupational phenomenon': International Classification of Diseases," WHO, 28 May 2019, [who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases](https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases)

your email inbox. Irrespective of the type of stress, it floods the body with the same types of stress hormones. Because many of our stressors are not life-threatening, we don't deal with them, and they stay with us, as we often don't feel able to reduce or remove these stressors. And it's having too much stress for too long and not having the tools to deal with it that balance it over from something useful to being destructive.

We often hear people refer to chronic stress as feeling "burnt out." But it is important to understand that although continuous stress may lead to burnout, stress and burnout are different. The manifestation is different, the causes are different, and ultimately, how we can most successfully deal with each are also different. Stress is essentially about being over-engaged (always busy), which leads to feeling emotionally overactive (stress), which leads to loss of physical energy. Burnout, on the other hand, is about being disengaged (loss of motivation), which leads to hopelessness, which leads to loss of emotional energy. Stress is essentially a physical issue, while burnout is an emotional issue.

The indications of burnout are, however, also similar to the indications that we see in those who are feeling compassion fatigue, a condition characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion specifically seen in those in the helping professions, leading to a diminished ability to empathize or feel compassion for others. Both burnout and compassion fatigue look similar. In both situations, the functioning in the workplace is reduced. But the causes are again different. Compassion fatigue is often associated with operational stress caused by job function (e.g., helping people, experiencing other people's trauma). Burnout, on the other hand, is more often related to organizational stress (e.g., administrative demands, shift work, constant policy and legislation changes, inadequate support by department). For other types of organizational stressors, see the police stress questionnaire.<sup>2</sup>

### How Big Is the Burnout Problem?

The American Institute of Stress<sup>3</sup> has identified the workplace as the greatest source of most people's stress. The Ruderman Foundation's 2018 report<sup>4</sup> highlighted that in terms of mental health, law enforcement officers were doing substantially worse than the general population in terms of mental health issues such as depression, PTSD, suicide ideation and suicide rates. Law enforcement officers must pass mental and physical fitness tests before entering the academy, and as such, start their service with a much higher baseline of mental health on entry into law enforcement. These numbers, therefore, reflect deterioration of mental health during service.

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This indicates that we need to focus on the work environment as well as other areas of life if we want to comprehensively understand mental health and wellness issues, especially in terms of burnout, which has been defined as a workplace issue. The FOP's own 2018 survey<sup>5</sup> of nearly 8,000 active and retired sworn officers showed that 78% of officers said they experienced critical stress on the job (FOP 2018). Badge of Life in 2015 highlighted that in terms of the effects of stress, 70% of officers reported stress-based physical health problems.

There are many studies that have looked at the **impact** of burnout, but to date, there have been few studies that have provided actual **prevalent** numbers on burnout in law enforcement to help us understand the extent of the issue. To gain an understanding of the situation, there is currently an ongoing systematic review at John Jay College of Criminal Justice (Salfati, 2021).<sup>6</sup> Pulling out six studies from this review that focused on U.S. law enforcement published during 2001–2019, which together accounted for 18,013 officers, we can get an initial overview of the problem. As an average across these studies, almost a quarter (24%) reported high, critical or severe levels of burnout. In the studies that provided further detail, just over a quarter (25.2%) reported high levels of emotional exhaustion (feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by work). Over a third (39.1%) indicated high levels of depersonalization (negative, cynical attitudes and feelings about their operational work), and just under a third (29.4%) indicated low levels of professional efficacy (negative self-view and lack of successful achievement in one's work). What these initial numbers are showing us overall is that between one-third to one-quarter of officers are reporting levels of burnout that put them at risk for not only disengaging with their work but also at risk for the mental and physical impact burnout can have on their mental, emotional and physical well-being.

### How Do We Address Burnout?

Stress is often related to issues of **workload** and **time management**. Therefore, regulating your work hours, reducing the number of tasks, getting more sleep and taking time off work are all great steps to help with reducing stress. Burnout, on the other hand, is more about **energy management**. Removing the stress and adding time is a good first step to deal with burnout, but it's not enough. The core focus on addressing burnout lies in finding ways to reengage with your meaning and purpose in your work to increase feelings of positive emotion and energy resulting from work.

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### REFERENCES

- <sup>2</sup> John Violanti, et al. "Highly Rated and Most Frequent Stressors Among Police Officers: Gender Differences." American Journal of Criminal Justice, 41(4), 645-662. DOI: 10.1007/s12103-016-9342-x. March 2016.
- <sup>3</sup> "Workplace Stress," The American Institute of Stress. [stress.org/workplace-stress](https://www.americaninstituteofstress.org/workplace-stress).
- <sup>4</sup> "Study: Police Officers and Firefighters Are More Likely to Die by Suicide Than in Line of Duty," Ruderman Family Foundation. [rudermanfoundation.org/white\\_papers/police-officers-and-firefighters-are-more-likely-to-die-by-suicide-than-in-line-of-duty/](https://rudermanfoundation.org/white_papers/police-officers-and-firefighters-are-more-likely-to-die-by-suicide-than-in-line-of-duty/)
- <sup>5</sup> "Report On FOP/NBC Survey of Police Officer Mental and Behavioral Health." [files.fop.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/OfficerWellnessSurvey.pdf](https://files.fop.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/OfficerWellnessSurvey.pdf).
- <sup>6</sup> C. Gabrielle Salfati, (2021) Law Enforcement Resilience. Investigative Psychology Research Unit, John Jay College of Criminal Justice. [jjay.cuny.edu/IPRU](https://www.jjay.cuny.edu/IPRU).

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What do we mean by energy management? Energy is about what fuels us rather than what depletes us. Reengaging with why we signed up for the job in the first place and reigniting our sense of purpose will allow us to regain meaning from our work. This, in turn, will increase the amount of positive emotion we feel from it, which we know from the field of positive psychology is the key ingredient for leading a fully engaged, flourishing life. This reengagement is the key step to moving out of burnout.

Positive psychology is the science of how to enable people to live their most engaged and flourishing lives. It does not focus on identifying what is wrong with us and instead focuses on what is right by proactively supporting and increasing well-being. Positive psychology is also the basis for resilience training. Resilience is a protective factor that helps people bounce back from adversity quicker and with less negative side effects. It has been shown through research to be a teachable mindset and skillset that few people are taught, but everyone needs, especially when dealing with day-to-day stress. The skillset that comes from resilience training can help to deal not only reactively to stressful events but can also help to proactively build up a shield against future stress. There are four different sets of resilience tools, and each one tackles the issue of burnout from different angles.

- **Mental resilience** provides tools to help us change our perception of stressful events, which leads to changing our experience of that stressful event. We can rarely change the situations we face, but by changing how we perceive stress, it gives us back a feeling of control by giving us choices for how we interpret the situation.
- **Emotional resilience** provides tools to help us deal with regulating our emotional reactions to stressful events. We can't change our initial reactions to stressful events, but we can learn to regulate our emotions to help us manage the aftereffects. By understanding why we react to stressful situations the way we do, it gives us back a feeling of control by giving us choices for how we feel about our reactions to the situation.
- **Physical resilience** provides tools to help reduce the stress response in our bodies, which helps reduce the physical impact of stress and provides tools that can help us feel like we have control back over our bodies.
- **Spiritual resilience** is not about religion (although religion for some is one of the avenues) but rather about finding our place in the world to find connection. It provides tools to help us uncover our strengths and values and how to leverage these in times of stress. If we



approach adversity with our innate strengths, we will more likely see the adversity as a challenge that we have the tools to resolve, rather than an insurmountable situation out of our control. This, in turn, gets us reconnected and feeds into fueling our meaning and purpose.

By employing tools that focus on our mind, our emotions and our bodies, we gain the practical tools to regain control over stressful situations. By further understanding how we can reframe the situation from something that depletes us to something that energizes us, we have gained the key tools to help us reconnect and reengage. That is the key to reigniting the good fire that fuels us rather than the bad fire that burns us.

### Resources

For more information on ongoing research and training on law enforcement wellness and resilience, see the IPRU website at [jjay.cuny.edu/IPRU](http://jjay.cuny.edu/IPRU). For updates from the IPRU, join us on LinkedIn at [linkedin.com/in/gabriellesalfati](https://www.linkedin.com/in/gabriellesalfati). **FOP**

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C. Gabrielle Salfati is a professor of psychology and the director of the Investigative Psychology Research Unit at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. Her 25-plus-year career to date has been focused on serving law enforcement. She has developed and spearheaded initiatives to prioritize best practices in translation of scientific evidence to be applicable in practice through the development of practitioner-focused training. She is part of the first group of people who emerged within the new field of investigative psychology and was instrumental in its development as an international research field on the empirical analysis of violent criminal behavior. Her work in the field of positive psychology focuses on the development of resilience training, and she leads key research programs on the evaluation of the impact of positive psychology-based resilience training programs to support wellness and prevent burnout in law enforcement and other front-line first responders.