

STUDY SUGGESTS NEED FOR
PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS/ MENTAL TOUGHNESS TRAINING
AS PART OF
UNDERCOVER NARCOTICS TRAINING SCENARIOS

You knew that narcotics assignments are stressful. You may have wondered if narcotics training scenarios can mimic some of that stress. And you may have been puzzled how to help yourself or trainees control that stress pucker factor (other than “just suck it up”).

A new study offers more proof that narcotics assignments are stressful; that training scenarios can create stress and that narcotic officers trainees want training in psychological skills to control the stress of their training and work.

While narcotics officers know it from their experience, previous research has shown that this type of assignment is stressful. Fitzgerald (2000) reported the results of a study that included operations stressors from the Narcotics Vice Division of the Honolulu Police Department. She reported that 66% of one group of agents indicated they "sometimes" or "always" experienced stress while performing undercover assignments. Sixty percent "sometimes" or "always" experienced anxiety when engaging in work that involved drug activity, and seventy-five percent "sometimes" or "always" felt nervous when working in an undercover capacity.

The presence of stress, while not unexpected and at times of possible value is of concern. This especially true as more and more work more clearly characterizes the potential negative effects of stress on performance (Grossman, 2004; Murray, 2004). Because of this, programs to support undercover agents with the overall stresses of their work have been developed and implemented (Hibler, 1995; Band & Sheehan, 1999). It is not clear, however, that training to help narcotics agents dealing with stress *during* an operation has been explored, developed or implemented. This is so, despite such training having been described for firefighters and even police officers in general (Asken, 1995, 2005, 2006).

With this awareness, consideration was given to developing a psychological skills or "mental toughness" training program for integration with narcotics undercover training. As part of this effort, a survey was undertaken to further document the perceived need for such training by new agents. The survey was administered during a narcotics officer training course sponsored a major eastern law enforcement agency. A total of 24 municipal and state police officers were surveyed. Four volunteers from each of six "squads" completed the questionnaire.

Some of the findings are as follows. All responses represent a rating on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 means little or no agreement or minimal effect and 10 means very strong agreement and impact with statements and factors being measured.

Because of the increasing recognition of the importance of reality-based scenario training (Murray, 2004), officers in the post-raid group were asked to rate (from 1 to 10) how realistic was the training scenario. The average rating was 7.5 with a range of 5 to 9.

Related to observations that trainees do experience stress during scenario exercises, the pre-raid group was asked to rate how much stress they anticipated they would feel during the scenario. The average rating was 7.3 with a range of 5 to 10. As a comparison, officers were asked to rate how stressed they felt during a police action on their jobs. The average rating was 7.0 with a range of 3 to 10.

Another set of question asked about personal stress responses and techniques to manage stress during an operation. The average rating for the statement "I wish my body wouldn't get so "revved up" (stressed) during a narcotics operation" was 9.8 with a range of 1 to 10.

The average rating for the statement "Choking or Freezing at a critical point is a worry for me" was 3.3 with a range of 1 to 10. The average rating for the statement "If I am too "up" or "wired" during a narcotics operation, I can calm myself down" was 7.1 with a range of 2 to 10.

A final set of questions related to whether the officers had ever received any training in psychological skills to handle stress during operations.

When asked whether they had ever received training in skills to handle stress during a narcotics or any special assignment operation (not life stress, critical incident stress or PTSD), 8 answered YES and 16 answered NO.

When asked whether they had ever received training in skills to handle stress during police training in general (not life stress, critical incident stress or PTSD), 9 answered YES and 15 answered NO.

This was small study with several limitations. Nonetheless, it did reveal some useful information about narcotics work and training scenarios. Once again, responses showed that police and narcotics operations can be very stressful. As hoped, scenario training is seen as realistic and does create levels of stress that require some management.

About one third of participants said they received training in how to manage operations stress. This number might actually be somewhat lower, however, because some individuals (though asked not to) included training in general life stress or post-traumatic stress in their responses. Also the comprehensiveness and extent of such training was not clear.

While the average rating of the ability to "calm down" during operations was fairly high, it is important to note there was quite a range (2 to 10). This means some officers did not feel very effective in their ability to manage their feelings of stress during an operation.

Perhaps most telling was the response to the statement of how important officers felt it would be to learn to control stress during an operation. When they were asked how

important they felt it would be to have training to handle stress during a narcotics operation. The average rating was 8.8 with a range of 2 to 10. As a result, a program for training and integrating psychological/ mental toughness skills was developed. While the effectiveness of this training is ongoing, evaluations from participants have been positive. Thus, there appears to be a need for mental toughness training, a means to integrate it with other narcotics skills training, and good acceptance of the training by officers.

This material is abstracted from the article AN INITIAL STUDY OF THE NEED TO INTEGRATE PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS FOR OPERATIONS STRESS WITH UNDERCOVER NARCOTICS TRAINING submitted for publication to The Firearms Instructor. The authors are Michael J. Asken, Ph.D., Psychologist, Pennsylvania State Police and Corporal John Yunk, Pennsylvania State Police.

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