Public safety telecommunicators answer the call 24/7, 365 days a year. Our chosen profession, our calling, is extremely stressful—whether we work from a 9-1-1 console, a dispatch console, or a supervisor’s console. Before we ever answer the first 9-1-1 call, or dispatch the first incident of the shift, we experience stress. Stress lives at home with our daily interactions, our relationships, our lifestyles; life in general can be stressful. Then add to all the job-related stressors: shift work and mandatory overtime that force us to be absent from major family events, difficult work environments and even internal conflicts. Now toss in steady exposure to duty-related trauma: a frightened caller in the midst of the worst situation of their life, giving life-saving instructions to the parent of a seriously injured child and other high-priority calls. We dispatch calls for service and track the status of up to 40 or 50 uniformed patrol officers and specialty units. We document self-initiated traffic stops, foot pursuits and vehicle pursuits with skill, patience, teamwork and courage, knowing that the next radio transmission may be those words that all of us train for and pray that we never hear, “shots fired, officer down.”

It’s a wonder that we can function at all, let alone at the fast pace that public safety communication demands of us. As supervisors and managers, we train our staff and ourselves to handle the uncooperative or distraught caller or injured officer effectively, efficiently and with calm professionalism, but that doesn’t mean these calls don’t affect us on a personal level. What is shown on the outside does not necessarily reflect how we feel on the inside.

We know that handling life-threatening emergencies day in and day out, while highly rewarding, is also highly stressful. As a result, telecommunicators experience a wide variety of job-related stress issues. These issues vary in the way that they manifest and the intensity of the manifestation. Stress reveals itself physically in the form of headaches, sleep problems, fatigue and general health problems such as diabetes, weight gain, high blood pressure and heart disease. Emotionally we may experience anxiety, depression or irritability, and behaviorally stress may result in eating disorders, drug or alcohol abuse, or self-imposed isolation and social withdrawal. The effects of job-related stress, including the human and financial toll to our agencies, are universal and not unique to any one PSAP.

Job-related stress routinely leads to increased absenteeism and burnout—comm center supervisors and managers know all too well that stress impacts job satisfaction and ultimately turnover in our agencies. In an attempt to reduce stress-related health problems and impacts to the agency, most PSAPs offer some form of stress management training. Some agencies make this training mandatory for new employees; others make it a standard part of the annual in-service training requirement. Most of us have been to at least one of these stress management classes—some can recite the tips...
from the building—every little bit helps!

Relax and smell the roses: Relaxing at the end of the day and on your days off will help reduce your stress. Make it a point to spend time socializing with friends and family, read a book, shoot a few hoops, go for a bike ride, take up gardening or treat yourself to a massage and some meditation. Make sure that you take vacation time and do your best to make sure that vacations are relaxing. How many times have you said “I just need a couple of days off to relax,” thinking that a mini-vacation will give you rest and relaxation, only to find that just when you are starting to relax and enjoy yourself it’s time to go back to work? Try to take a two-week vacation instead of two one-week vacations or several of those mini-vacations, you might find that you are more rested and focused when you go back to work.

Get plenty of exercise: Physical activity is an important piece of the puzzle when it comes to reducing and preventing the effects of stress. Aim for a minimum of 30 minutes of exercise, three times per week. You do not have to buy expensive gym memberships. Ask around your agency, most have training facilities and wellness programs for employees. Check with your city or county Parks and Recreation Department to see if they offer free memberships, access to their facilities or programs for public employees. Aerobic exercise is great for releasing pent-up stress and tension—take a walk during your lunch break, take the stairs instead of the elevator, park a little further away if your lunch break, take the stairs instead of the escalator, exercise is great for releasing pent-up stress and tension.

Well-fed and properly nourished bodies are better prepared to handle the stress we face every day. Start your day with a healthy breakfast and your mind clear with nutritious meals throughout the day. Get plenty of nutrients in your diet, knowing the information and practicing dietary management can increase your ability to follow them, which makes them worth repeating.

Eat right: Be mindful of what you eat. Well-fed and properly nourished bodies are better prepared to handle the stress we face every day. Start your day with a healthy breakfast and your mind clear with nutritious meals throughout the day. Get plenty of nutrients in your diet, knowing the information and practicing dietary management can increase your ability to follow them, which makes them worth repeating.

Socialize: Socializing provides support and helps you tolerate life’s trials and tribulations. On those days when you are a bit depressed or irritable and you think that you just want to stay in bed, try reaching out to friends or co-workers. Meet a friend for a cup of coffee or ask if you might come over for dinner. In other words, relax. Don’t turn the TV off before you go to sleep. If you don’t, part of your brain may actually continue to pay attention and interfere with sleep. If you need some kind of white noise to help you sleep, consider using a sound machine. Natural sounds such as rainfall, waterfalls or ocean waves tend to be more soothing and less distracting to the brain.

Laughter: All too often, we spend away from caffeine or alcohol after dinner. gunman is a stimulant. Every day we reach for our caffeine fix as soon as we wake up, usually in the form of coffee, tea or soda, and we take in caffeine continuously throughout the day in these forms as well as in our favorite chocolates. Excessive amounts of caffeine may prevent you from falling asleep. Additionally, you should steer clear of alcohol due to bedtime, as it can lead to disrupted sleep later in the night. You don’t have to do these all at once. Try a new one every couple of weeks or maybe you might be surprised at how much better you sleep and more rested you feel.

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