

ESCAPE THE 9-1-1 STRESS CASCADE

Protect your quality of life, professional performance and sleep.

By Jim Marshall



As a mental health professional who was long ago adopted into the 9-1-1 family, I'm grateful there's so much buzz about resilience among 9-1-1 professionals these days. However, if we settle for adopting the most common definition of resilience — “the ability to bounce back” — we are at a major disadvantage as we strive to win the 9-1-1 stress battle. That definition is too puny; it trivializes how important it is to safeguard your life, one heartbeat at a time — literally.

A more helpful definition is offered by a pioneer in psychophysiology, Dr. Rollin McCraty, and his colleagues at the Institute of HeartMath. They define human resilience as:

The capacity or ability to prepare for, recover from and adapt in the face of stress, adversity, trauma or tragedy. The energy you have available to use for physical, mental, and emotional needs ... like a battery to draw upon to handle your daily challenges and duties, and to remain calm, think clearly and be in control of your emotions ... rather than become stressed out, which further drains your energy reserves.¹

This is the robust resilience we need to be fully alive, fully present with the ones we love, excel in our work, and to live long and

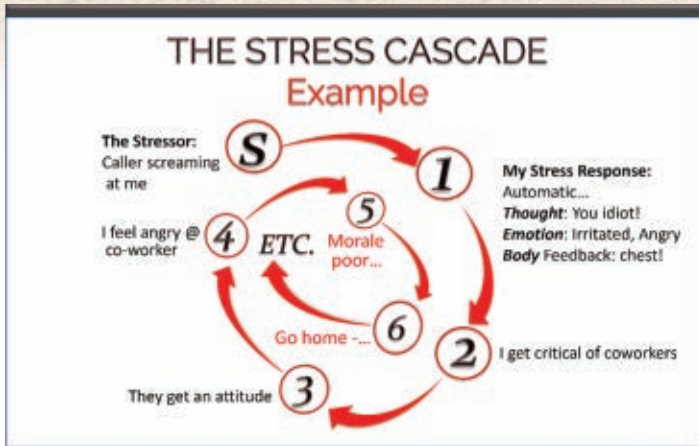


Figure 1

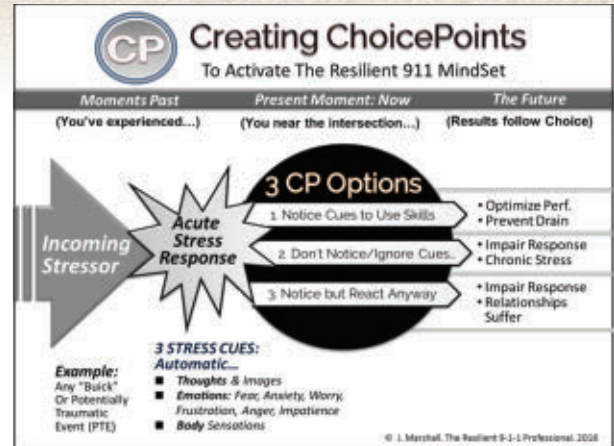


Figure 2

prosper — in short, to achieve a high quality of life. One of the biggest drains on your resilience battery threatening this quality of life is getting repeatedly dragged into what I call the stress cascade. Figure 1 illustrates a stress cascade involving a 9-1-1 professional that began while handling a call from a rude, irate, over-demanding caller.

You can see how the public safety telecommunicator's unmanaged response to the stressor set off a chain reaction that hijacked his waking hours that day and even his sleep. It began with his natural unmanaged stress response to one event, which pulled him into a negative mindset. This mindset then impacted how he interacted with his peers, setting off more conflict pulling down his squad's morale and leaving him and his resilience battery depleted as he headed home.

The sobering fact is that we can find ourselves pulled into many more than one stress cascade in a single day. Unless we learn to prevent and quickly escape these cascades, we repeatedly overdose on the primary stress hormone as cortisol floods our bloodstream. Cortisol fuels relationship conflict, compromises work performance and promotes unhealthy tissue inflammation — setting us up for medical problems and an epic battle at bedtime between cortisol and sleep. It's a battle that cortisol wins every time unless we learn to escape the stress cascade to keep our resilience battery charged. Here's how.

ESCAPING THE CASCADE

STEP 1: NOTICE YOUR STRESS CUES

Imagine you're the one who got caught up in the stress cascade in Figure 1. You end the call with the irate caller and in the next moment, you hear yourself snapping at a coworker over something trivial (or feel yourself getting irritable and shutting out your shift mates). Now, answer the following questions as quickly as you can without thinking:

- What might have been your automatic thought *during* a call like this?
- What might have been your *emotion* at that moment during the call?
- Now, if you did a quick body scan (from the bottom of your feet to the top of your head) in that same moment, where in your body would you feel the distress? (Often, 9-1-1 professionals feel it in their head, chest, stomach, jaw, etc.)

If you were able to answer even one of these questions, congratulations! These are the three elements of our stress response — our raw, uncensored thoughts, auto-emotions and auto-body feedback (sensations). In combination, I call them our “psycho-fizz” — our psychophysiological response to a stressor. This psycho-fizz occurs automatically when our brain perceives a threat to our physical or emotional safety. But rather than consider

these three elements of our stress response as wrong or bad reactions that we should ignore and disregard, we'll be wiser to notice and use them as cues to manage our stress response. Once you can notice one or more of these cues in real-time during stressful events, you'll be able to create a “ChoicePoint.”²

STEP 2: CREATE CHOICEPOINTS

Think of a ChoicePoint as an intersection that enables you to take a few more steps to exit the stress cascade. First, with this awareness you can activate a resilience strategy to reset your psycho-fizz, sparing yourself and those around you from even bigger energy drains, conflicts and regrets. The key is to realize when you're at that intersection. In Figure 2, you can see that after exposure to the stressor, you experience a stress response. At that moment, you have three options. You might notice you're frustrated and angry but react anyway, or you may fail to notice your stress cues. In either case, you'll end up blowing through the intersection with bad results. But if you practice the third option, you'll notice your cues so you can use the resetting skills with good results.

STEP 3: RESETTING YOUR PSYCHO-FIZZ WITH EVIDENCE-BASED SKILLS

Once you've noticed your automatic stress cues, you can activate a skill to reset your

psycho-fizz. Heart-focused breathing (HFB) is an important resilience skill to achieve this reset. Why? It turns out that HFB changes your heart rhythm from chaotic (where the heart rate varies erratically) to coherent (where the rate steadily increases, decreases, then increases, etc.). This smoother rhythm is called heart coherence. This is a big deal because when you achieve coherence your heart and brain optimize functioning, enabling you to calm down, think more powerfully and act more wisely while recharging your mental, emotional, physical and spiritual resilience.

HFB is easy. Try it right now. It just takes a minute. First, imagine your breath is flowing in and out of your chest. Then, take a few deep breaths, about five seconds in, then five seconds out, repeating this breathing pattern for about 60 seconds. Typically, HFB results in quickly feeling more grounded and in charge of your thinking. You are then ready to ask the key question, as shown in Figure 3, to achieve the best possible outcomes: “What’s the smartest thing I can do right now in this situation?” If you are in a situation like the telecommunicator in our story and noticed your stress cues and reset, your answer might be to continue doing HFB between the next few calls, coaching yourself to be patient while your sense of calm increases. If you blew through that ChoicePoint without noticing your cues or resetting, and became critical of your coworkers, the smartest thing to do might be to offer them a sincere apology and an assurance you’re working to settle back down.

In other words, you can now exit the cascade rather than remain stuck. Figure 3 illustrates the process leading to this exit.

You can also use HFB preventively or to reset your psycho-fizz before and after many of your 9-1-1 calls (as time permits). But what can you do to reset if you’re in the middle of a hot call? You certainly can’t say, “Please hold while I do heart-focused breathing.” Is it possible to take a strategic breath during a crisis call, even if it’s not deep or heart-focused? Most telecommunicators encourage distressed callers to do it. When could you

“steal” deep breaths yourself? Veteran 9-1-1 professionals affirm you can take that breath when the caller is talking as you’re entering data into CAD. I call this CAD breathing. You may not get the complete benefit of HFB, but it will still help a lot. Telecommunicators are amazing multi-taskers. As many of my students who’ve been using this technique will attest, you can do this.

To maximize the effectiveness of HFB and to improve the quantity and quality of your sleep, practice it at bedtime. Most telecommunicators average only 4 to 6 hours of sleep per 24 hours. That’s way too little to sustain good health and enjoy quality of life. Most humans lay in bed awake for at least a few minutes (and telecommunicators often much longer) before falling asleep. This makes bedtime the perfect chance to practice it. By making HFB a habit at bedtime, you are more likely to remember to use strategic breathing in the middle of your busy life too. By practicing HFB at bedtime, you can also engrain a strong mental association between strategic breaths and activation of heart coherence, making it more likely you

will remember to do CAD breathing at the console and improve its effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

When my sister started dispatching in 1983, there was little knowledge about the psychology of 9-1-1 and the toll this work can take on those who sit at the console. We now know much more about those demands and much more about what you can do to protect and fortify your well-being as you face them. The guidance offered in this article is just a small portion of the training available now. If you are new to the 9-1-1 profession, you may not yet feel the need to use the information presented here or to use all the resources you have access to in your center. If you are a veteran, like many who have confided in me over the years, you may now be experiencing the cumulative impact of your long service. In both cases, know this: resilience skills and strategies like those offered here are essential for 9-1-1 professionals. Yet they aren’t always enough. If you are experiencing significant distress interfering with your ability to enjoy a high quality of life or do

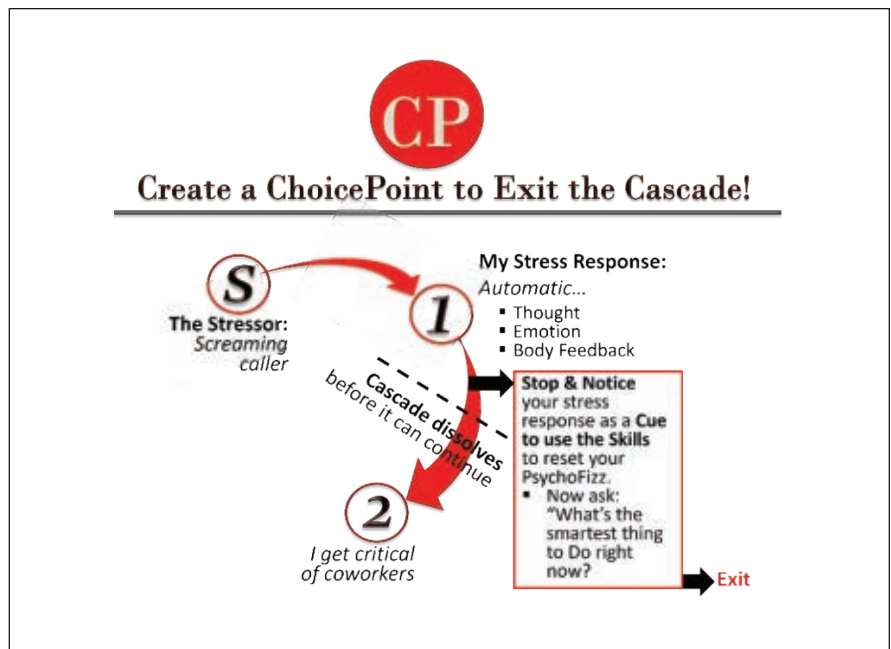


Figure 3
Resetting Your Psycho-Fizz During Calls.

so in the future, ask members of your peer support team (or trusted peers) for help by reaching out to your employee assistance program or a licensed mental health professional competent in treating emergency responders. ●

This article is based on revised excerpts from *The Resilient 9-1-1 Professional: A comprehensive guide to surviving and thriving in the 9-1-1 center*, chapter 6, *Building the Resilient*

9-1-1 Mindset, Part 2: The ChoicePoints Strategy.

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of the 911 Wellness Foundation, a nonprofit devoted to advocacy upholding dispatcher mental health and resilience.

REFERENCES

- ¹ McCraty, R., Moor, S., Lohn, M., 2012. Resilience guide: Law Enforcement and other first responders.
- ² Marshall, J. (2018). Chapter 6. Building the Resilient 9-1-1 mindset, part 2: the ChoicePoints strategy. In J. Marshall & T. Laorenza (Eds.). *The Resilient 9-1-1 professional: a comprehensive guide to surviving and thriving together in the 9-1-1 center* (pp. 65-83).

CDE EXAM #67610

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In a stress cascade, your stress response refers to all of the following except: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Thoughts b. Situational awareness c. Emotions d. Body feedback 2. “The ability to bounce back” is a “puny” definition of: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Mental toughness b. Trauma response c. Resilience d. Tennis elbow 3. _____ is a stress hormone that floods the blood stream and may cause medical problems. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Serotonin b. Melatonin c. Dopamine d. Cortisol 4. _____ is an intersection you create that enables you to take a few more steps to exit the stress cascade. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Stress resistance b. ChoicePoint c. Exit path d. Resiliency | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Which of the following techniques may be a first option to reset your “psycho-fizz?” <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Heart focused breathing b. Progressive muscle relaxation c. Self-meditation d. A smoke break 6. How many hours of sleep, on average, do 9-1-1 professionals get per 24 hours? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. 7 ½ b. 2-3 c. This has never been studied d. 4-6 7. What is a brief technique that can be used to reset your “psycho-fizz” when you only have a few seconds? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Holding your breath b. Lamaze breathing c. CAD breathing d. Meditation 8. A smooth heart rate rhythm is referred to as: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Heart coherence b. Heart rate variability c. Chill factor d. DFIB | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Which of the following can be used to increase your awareness of physical sensations in real time? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Psychedelics b. Psychotropic medications c. Sensory deprivation d. Body scan 10. Which of the following would be the most helpful technique to use at bedtime to improve your quality of sleep? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Transcendental awareness b. Watching a boring TV show c. Heart-focused breathing d. A high intensity workout |
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CDE exam questions by Richard Janka.

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