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Use and Perceived Effectiveness of Coping Skills among Police Officer Spouses

Andrea Dinsmore, PsyD
Inspiration for Research
Review of the Literature

- Health Risks
- Substance Abuse Problems
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder
- Suicide
- Problematic Relationships
- Treatment Options and Coping Skills
Method

Design

Initial study used semi-structured interviews to investigate the coping skills and strategies used by wives to support husbands who are police officers and to minimize the impact of job-related stresses upon their spouses, themselves and their families.

Participants

Participants in the original study were female, at least 18 years of age, and married to a police officer for at least one year.
Participant Demographics

- Ten women from six states across the country
  - CA, FL, IN, MA, OK, VA
- Aged 26 – 49
- 9 Caucasian, 1 “mixed race”
- Various occupations, all had graduated high school
- Years of marriage ranged from 1.75 to 15
- Seven of the ten participants had children
- Spouses’ duties included: Patrol, k9 Unit, Academy and Range Training, Supervision, Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) sniper, and Fatal Alcohol Crash Team (FACT) Officer
Thematic coding analysis of the participant transcripts revealed two overarching themes and seven sub-themes:

- **Experience of Stressors**
  - Safety Concerns
  - The Public Perception
  - The Police Officer Schedule

- **Managing Stressors**
  - Communication in the Relationship
  - Talking to Children
  - An Introduction to the Police World
  - Methods of Coping
Experience of Stressors

Safety Concerns

Fears while on duty

“He went to the Sheriff’s Academy to be a Deputy Reserve and I was fine with it. Of course, I worry. I worried whenever he wanted to do that because it’s a dangerous job, but I was proud of him for going toward his goal…he always calls me every time he gets off work and if it’s 30 minutes past the time when he’s supposed to be off, I worry that something’s happened to him.” - Isabel

Fears while on duty

“He actually didn’t want to live inside the city because he was always worried when we went out that he’d see people that he had arrested…he tends to not like to do things, he tends to not like to be in crowds, so it does limit the things we do, but you just get used to it.” - Erica
Experience of Stressors

The Public Perception

“We get a lot of ‘Hey can you fix my ticket?’ or ‘Hey there was a shooting downtown, do you know what happened?’ So it’s more that we’re a criminal dictionary than anything else. Whenever anybody gets in trouble, they want advice, they want help, but as far as everything else, no one really cares much about anything to do with us.” – Barbara
Experience of Stressors

The Police Officer Schedule

“He’s on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. On our daughter’s fourth birthday, he ended up getting called out and, you know, she’s sitting there, like, ‘It’s my birthday, where’s Daddy?’ – Debra

“We live in an apartment complex town house and he’s the courtesy officer, so it doesn’t matter if he’s off duty. I mean, they’ll come and bang on our door at one in the morning.” - Francesca
Managing Stressors

Communication in the Relationship

“This stuff you can’t hold in and hide, I mean you have to talk. Definitely, communication is huge. You’ve got to bring up what you’re dealing with.”
– Barbara

“If something bothers him, I wait for him until he’s ready to tell me and then we’ll talk about it. Not to push it, because pushing it just pushes it. I wait until he’s ready to talk and when he’s ready, then we talk.”
– Janet
Managing Stressors

Talking to Children

Shielding Children

“If at any point I’m concerned about something I don’t let them see it because at this point they can’t process it and my job, part of my job, is to keep our house a sanctuary for them and I figure they’ll figure it out soon enough.” – Debra

Honest Communication

“I know some people shelter their kids, we don’t. We try to make our kids aware that there are bad people in the world and that’s what Dad does, Dad goes to catch bad guys. We try to talk to our kids about the types of calls or if there’s stuff on the news or you know definitely police related…like a school shooting where police had to respond. That’s what we try to do.” – Christine
Managing Stressors

An Introduction to the Police World

The Police Community

“If he was on second shift, which he’s not now, we’d try to go out to eat while he’s at work to try to interact with the work world, too. My daughter helps my husband get ready for work so he can explain all the gear and how it goes on. My son’s a little bit older, so he’s past that stage and he’s aware of all of it. But my husband will take him shooting and, you know, take them to the police department, go around and meet different parts of the department. Some of the steps we take is to try to be involved, we don’t make that part of our lives something that’s not allowed or kids can’t be a part of.” – Christine

Awareness and Understanding

“So much of this has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that he’s a police officer, it’s just the way that we’ve always been and I think that a lot of it is because of our background because we’re both military, we’re both... and the fact that we knew each other before this. This is what he was doing... he’s just wearing a different uniform, basically.” – Debra
Managing Stressors

Methods of Coping

General Attitude

“I tend not to overreact if he’s had a bad call or freak out if comes home and says ‘Oh I had a call and the guy had a gun,’ I’m not like ‘Oh my gosh!’ I’m usually like, ‘Okay cool, you did what you were supposed to do right?’”

- Christine

Family Support

“We kind of have a built in peer support system as his brothers are all police officers. It kind of comes with family dinner.” - Janet
Managing Stressors

Methods of Coping
Counseling

“We went to counseling for probably for a year and a half to two years and I think it really helped us. It helped me to understand that he’s not choosing his job over me, you know, just kind of accepting that it’s not him, because I was just so mad at him and mad at his job and I thought it was his fault. But it helped me realize it’s not his fault and it helped us learn to communicate better and I put such high expectations on myself. It helped me learn that not everything had to be perfect.”

– Helen

“One of his friends from the academy that we’re neighbors with, he had a problem and he went and got counseling and after a while he was told he wasn’t fit to carry a gun anymore and they took his gun and his badge after 15 years on the job, so that’s just glaring in our face and a lot of people see that. That was very…and maybe that’s an extreme example, but somebody went to get help, they were diagnosed, they were told to take medication, and they say, “Well, you’re not fit for duty anymore.”

– Barbara
Managing Stressors

Methods of Coping

Outlets for Stress

“We both have blogs and I think um I know I, for one, started mine as a way of getting all this out of me. That was my therapy. Especially at the beginning, when my daughter was born, he was still on midnights and coping with two small children on my own, pretty much. I started a blog as therapy. And it’s evolved over the years. It’s no longer really this therapeutic thing that it started as. Now its more of a ‘Look I’ve done this, I’ve been there, these are the lessons I’ve learned.’ And he does the same thing, he shares stuff on his as well, things like that.” - Debra

Police Wife Support

“I think that the ones I’m closest to are ones I’ve never met in person, which is, I don’t know if it’s just because we’ve never gotten to know each other better, we’re more open online. I don’t know if it’s safer, I don’t know. That’s a whole nother thing to analyze. But, I know that some of the ones that I am closest to are ones that I’ve met through their blogs and now we have our own personal relationships with each other and I know that if there’s any police related thing that I need to get off my chest or that I need be talked through or I need to talk to about, they’re the ones I go to and vice versa.” - Debra
Managing Stressors

Methods of Coping

Non-Police Support

“As far as socializing with other police officers, we really don’t. You know, its two separate worlds almost... every other week, he does, he has a game night with friends, um, non-police officer friends. That lets him relax.”

- Debra

Embrace Home Life

“We try to make extra time for each other, you know whether it’s me waiting up for him at night and just hanging out with him before I go to bed or whatever.”

- Isabel
Weaknesses of Research Design

Small Number of Participants
- Ten interviews

Single Perspective
- Husbands were not included

Limited Scope
- Heterosexual couples only
Current Research Project

Areas of Consideration

• Trauma
• PTSD
• Couples Therapy
• Coping Skills
Byrne’s Theory of Coping (1961)

- Reviewed literature on coping skills and perceptual defense mechanisms in an attempt to ascertain underlying themes

- Uncovered two distinct domains of functioning in response to a stressor:
  - Repression
    - Extreme avoidance
  - Sensitization
    - Extreme approach
Dimensionality of Coping

Repression
- Deny/minimize the existence of stress
- Fail to verbalize feelings of distress
- Avoid thinking about possible negative encounters

Sensitization
- Enhance
- Information search
- Rumination
- Obsessive worrying

Avoidance
- Shielding kids
- Hobbies
- Physical activities

Modulation & Control
- Understanding of police life
- Planned date nights/holidays
- Planned communication

Cognitive Restructuring
- Support groups/therapy
- Embrace police life
- Awareness & Understanding

Shared Affect/Catharsis & Communication
- Blogs/Groups/Therapy
- Talk when necessary
- Talk often
- Talk on husband’s terms

Direct Involvement
- Blending work/home
- Attend Calls/Ride alongs
- Introduce kids to work
Method for Current Study

- Recruitment of Participants
- Survey
  - "Police Stress"
    - The experience of anxiety, fear, or distress as a result of the police officer occupation
  - 18 Questions regarding coping skills
    - Followed by questions regarding frequency and efficacy
  - 10 Questions specific to child-rearing
  - 1 Open-Ended question for additional coping skills
- REDCap
Clinical Implications

- Teaching the skills
- Using the skills to inform treatment
- Measurement tool

Ultimate goal
- Minimize effects of trauma/stressors on the police family by teaching and informing spouses of the optimal ways to manage their stress.
Support Our Officers!