The Factor of Combat Stress Reaction: Comparing Military Combat to Law Enforcement and Current Social Violence

By
Richard C. Lumb, Ph.D.
State University of New York at Brockport, Emeritus

Society is troubled in many ways. The continuous wars, shameless acts of terrorism, elevated substance abuse, crime, violence, and dozens of added factors that contribute to social discomfort, wear away our foundation as a country. Add to that a democratically elected government that is not functional and divided at their level, while the millions of citizens for whom they exist are left in darkened rooms, all but forgotten. We enter the gate of chaos where some thrive, but most do not.

Police officers represent societies front-line against deviance, respond to injury and other threats that people do not manage well and encounter ideology that's hard to grasp. We know that those called the "thin blue line" are under attack from well-financed groups, whose message and mantra is not representative of truth, rather, unspoken clandestine goals. Police are being killed and injured in growing numbers, illustrative of an unacceptable and distorted shadow society. Rather than working collaboratively to resolve issues, is replaced with violence. Police encounter a mounting increase in deviance, civil disorder, and working long hours; and a sense that social normalcy is fleeting from their world.

We ask, "*Is it taking a toll*" on them? The answer simply is, "*Yes*"! How could it not? What is the purpose of this shadow movement, what is the greater goal, and where does it leave a society not familiar with the dark forces of harm?

A sustainable solution is not in existence at the moment; it takes time and a depth of engagement, now missing in public rhetoric. When will action occur to increase understanding, bring clarity, and achieve solutions to troubles not codified?

I recently read in van der Kolk et al., (1996) Traumatic Stress[1], about the research to understand military combat stress reactions. A parallel can be made between military and civilian police, in the delivery of services, uniforms, discipline and a rank hierarchy. At times, it seems that we live in a movie environment where frame by frame life proceeds and we do not see but what just occurred. To make a comparison with other similar situations allows expansion of understanding and occasional action. I feel we must step away from the headlines, the snippets
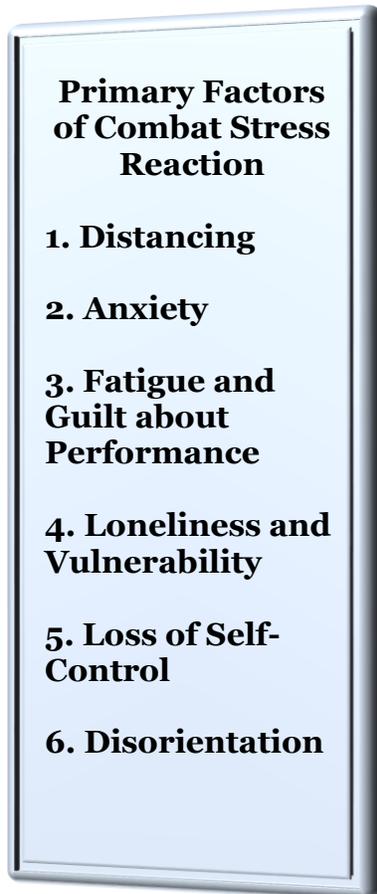
> **Combat Stress carries the same deadly outcomes whether civilian police or military units.**

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[1] Van der Kolk, B., Bessel, A., McFarlane, A., and Weisaety, L. (1996). Traumatic Stress. New York, NY: Guilford press, 105-106.

of information and examine with some depth cause, reaction, and response. Without more depth, we continue to exist on the surface of the water, while all that resides below is obscured. Therefore, I seek to provide the following comparison to generate thought, inquisitiveness, and solutions to a complex problem; or we cannot live within a free society.

Combat Stress Reaction (CSR). (by van der Kolk et al.[2])

Placed under the rubric of psychiatric causality, combat stress reaction (CSR) seeks to understand how exposure to war and the inhumanity of social chaos affects individuals. Van der Kolk states, that CSR speaks to symptoms such as "*Affective manifestations including restlessness, irritability, psychomotor retardation, apathy, psychological withdrawal, startle reactions, anxiety and depression, constriction of affect, confusion, abdominal pains, nausea and vomiting, aggressive and hostile behaviors, paranoid reactions, and ill-concealed carefulness* (1996:107)."

Primary Factors of Combat Stress Reaction

1. Distancing

2. Anxiety

3. Fatigue and Guilt about Performance

4. Loneliness and Vulnerability

5. Loss of Self-Control

6. Disorientation

Research into issues experienced by soldiers, impacting on behavior, psychological and physiological well-being, has similarities with civilian police duties. Careful examination enables us to make judgments and apply that knowledge to current issues. Moreover, importantly, it raises awareness, and in that status, we seek improvement.

Six Primary Factors of CSR Patterns: Military and Civilian Police.

Insight into the effects of accumulated stress, adversity and trauma (ASAT), is associated with the consequences of combat on military personnel when compared with our civilian police officers. Following are the six comparisons.

1. Distancing. In military combat, some give thought to run from danger, about former civilian life, and a sense of numbness about the situation. It is an attempt to put the individual's thinking someplace else, away from the combat situation.

In law enforcement, the build-up is more gradual. The level of violence against police in current society and the killing of police to appease warped rationale create new thoughts. Some will consider a different career, the immediate need for backup officers, or hesitation on entering into a situation that poses an elevated threat. The delay is

necessary if determined prudent, and we must not chastise, given the madness of the present day.

2. Anxiety. Military combat elicits thoughts when the person experiences substantial stress; it can incapacitate or near paralyze effects as one considers the threat of death or significant harm. One of the manifestations is the inability to sleep, or to drift in and out of sleep, restlessness and reoccurring thoughts that are fearful in nature. It leads to fatigue and inhibits performance.

In law enforcement, going on-duty begins with concerns for one's safety, above what had been normal expectations. The duplicitous nature of ambush, of killing a police officer for some distorted rationale, death by an unseen perpetrator does not start one's duty shift anywhere near a positive perspective. It elevates hyper-arousal, suspicion, caution, a pulling together of the individual with all others on shift, and high awareness of one's environment. The cowardly nature of ambush in itself contributes to discomfort and elevates public anger at the thought someone would resort to this tactic.

3. Fatigue and Guilt about Performance. In combat, these conditions will lead to reduced performance due to the physical and psychological exhaustion of the individual. Guilt emerges as the person realizes their performance is not as efficient as previously acknowledged. They are dependent on each other and feeling as if you are not meeting your obligation to them, exacerbates guilt.

In law enforcement, unprecedented demands for the job, the elevated threat levels, overtime, family responsibilities, court and other requirements often push sleep patterns toward harmful levels. The revolving nature of a police officer, responding to a wide variety of social disorder and individual dysfunction and crime, is taxing by itself. Reconciling the behaviors of people becomes challenging and in time one accepts that humans have the capacity to live in non-compliance to social mores and legal prescriptions, so one just does their job. Fatigue, however, elevates the negativity as it often represents abnormality that is in conflict with the individual's life, beliefs, values, and preferred lifestyle. Elevated caution may reduce earlier performance goals, as being cautious and methodical is achieved at a slower pace.

4. Loneliness and Vulnerability. Military personnel find themselves away from the normalcy of home, family, friends, jobs and other markers that give purpose and comfort. One does become close to others in the unit and in that co-dependent relationship, the normalcy becomes the guide. Combat elevates vulnerability as an option to take individual actions but is limited to evading danger and near impossible. These combat emotions are related to the death of others and increase loneliness of survivors and a sense of the diminished probability of survival themselves.

In law enforcement, being in a patrol vehicle and responding to a call that carries threat and danger elicits feelings of being alone. The knowledge that the first officer on the scene may encounter a situation where harm or death potentially exists, and an environment where residents are not supportive and some hostile, establishes feelings of being a lone warrior until help arrives. Vulnerability in this situation elevates heart

rate, breathing, the release of Adrenalin, hyper-vigilance, on-guard with all senses at peak awareness, and caution as a central element. It can be daunting, and relief only occurs when additional officers arrive and the situation is under control.

5. Loss of Self-Control. A combat situation where comrades are being injured or killed and the battle continues can be overwhelming for some. The reactions may include vomiting, wetting or diarrhea. The control of one's bodily functions reacts to the immensity of the situation with impulsive behavior such as screaming, weeping, or experiencing "trance-like" awareness. The intensity cannot be imagined by those who have not experienced it!

In law enforcement, this seldom happens as the intensity of combat-like conditions is infrequent and unlikely. With the random murder of police officers, by the hand of radical thinking of some, the extremeness of the situation may cause a similar reaction. It is uncontrolled anger at the encounter that triggers yelling, cursing, and threats being issues.

6. Disorientation. The intensity of combat, particularly when it is an everyday occurrence, can result in not knowing where one is, the day of the week, and difficulty in concentrating or making clear associations of people and purpose. As conditions improve, the disorientation diminishes and average awareness returns.

> *The misnomer*
> *"BREAKING NEWS"*
> *As normal as sneezing has the effect of creating turmoil, pre-judgment, and instant opinion. Over-used, misused and harmful in some instances.*

In law enforcement, "out of normal" behaviors or situations, make it difficult to maintain attention to the 360 degrees around the officer. Engaged in an intense situation requires full concentration on the events occurring at that moment.

Closing statement.

People who have not spent one hour with a police officer or studied what policing consists of, to understand crime, criminality, and how the system of justice applies to individuals; often make a judgment and stubbornly stick to their opinion regardless of fact and data. It just means you have a hollow argument based on ideology, emotion and other drivers that cannot be validated. However, so what? One might ask?

I have for some time stated that elected and appointed officials have mindlessly discounted social issues and not wanting to work at sustainable solutions, dumped them on the police. When doing this they have not provided adequate resources or expertise, and then avoided sharing in the responsibility when something goes wrong. When "Breaking News" makes a statement, the public retreat into the shadows and resounding silence, avoidance, and cowardice leave the police chief and department hanging without support.

We must ask, "Do we want the police department to handle non-law enforcement issues? If so, hire substance abuse staff, mental health expertise, and social workers for all other human dysfunction that is not illegal in nature. If you want the police to do this, then we must appropriately staff, finance and bring in the expertise needed to fulfill these duties. Otherwise, the illusion is breaking down and will soon collapse. Many statutes that authorize and define the role of police speak of enforcement of law established by citizen legislative bodies, but not of being all things to all problems. We either maintain proficiency of duties and powers, not diffused by loading them with all manner of a social issue where other expertise, is required.

Okay, this diatribe is over, but it leads to my main point. We are slowly allowing our police officers, people who must pass rigorous entrance testing that most of the public cannot complete, and to respond to situations that are not their responsibility. The level of specialized training and education is mandated, rules and policy are volumes more than what the average citizen faces, yet we cast them into conditions where other services are more suited to handle. It makes no sense except to illustrate the indecision that exists.

We have dumped far too much on police, and they are stretched beyond the purpose of police. What we see happening is being played out for some through accumulated stress, adversity, and trauma; all of which is harmful to the psychological, social, emotional, and physiological well-being of the individual. To become society's scapegoat for individual citizen dysfunction; when we champion violence, deviance, and horrible acts; we no longer operate from core values. We are milling about, wandering in a small circle, exasperated and angry, filling the void of indecision and seemingly not caring. Neither are we ready for this vital force to not be present. Perhaps vigilantism appeals to some, but that is a retreat from rationality.

Understanding causes of harm leads to the identification of symptoms and then to appropriate and supportive assistance. Combat stress reaction (CSR) for military personnel is all too real. For police, there are strong parallels, the similarity of symptom and response, prompting the need to minimize it. The six primary factors are a good place to start, for it offers to understand and leads to informed thinking; a refreshing change from where we are now!

"Judge me not by innuendo, but of character, moral fiber, deeds and contribution to others." Lumb, 2016.

[2] Van der Kolk, B., Bessel, A., McFarlane, A., and Weisaety, L. (1996). Traumatic Stress. New York, NY: Guilford Press, 105-106.