

Composed in Chaos: Understanding Stress and Trauma



About the Presenter

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Education

- Master's in Counseling
- Bachelor's in Sociology & Corrections

Experience

- Mental Health Liaison, Hoover Police Crisis Negotiations
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Learning Objectives

1. Recognize and Understand Stress Responses

- Identify common **physical, emotional, and cognitive signs** of **stress** and **trauma** experienced by first responders during and after critical incidents.

2. Apply Evidence-Based Coping Strategies

- Demonstrate practical techniques such as **controlled breathing, grounding, cognitive reframing, and basic de-escalation skills** to regulate emotions and maintain composure in high-stress situations.

3. Develop a Personal Resilience Plan

- Create an individualized plan that integrates **healthy coping strategies, peer support, and self-care practices** to sustain long-term emotional well-being and operational effectiveness.

Who are You?

- How has this job changed you?
- How you see danger, safety, and control
- How you relate to others (on the job and at home)
- How you manage emotions, stress, and trust
- What you carry after the call ends

Key Line (italic or lighter font):

This job doesn't just change what you do — it changes how you think, feel, and respond.



Composed Definition

- When everything around you is chaos, your composure becomes the **anchor** — for yourself, your team, and the people you serve. This is at the heart of what we'll explore in this course: understanding how to maintain composure, even in the most high-stress situations



Becoming The Person You Needed

- Many of us became the person we once needed.
- Some didn't have that support when starting the job—or even growing up.
- That awareness can be powerful as we reconnect with our purpose.



Understanding your “why” means:

Connecting with your core purpose, values, and motivations — the deeper reason behind what you do.

Often, that “why” is this:

Becoming the person you needed.

- The presence you once wished for
- The protection you didn't have
- The steadiness someone showed you — or didn't

Bottom line (bold):

Your “why” isn't a slogan.
It's a lived experience.



Why Stress and Trauma Matter in Policing

① High-Stakes, High-Stress Work

- First responders regularly face life-threatening situations, critical incidents, and exposure to trauma.

② Physical and Mental Health Impacts

- Chronic stress can lead to fatigue, sleep disturbances, anxiety, depression, and increased risk of PTSD.

③ Performance and Decision-Making

- Unmanaged stress can impair judgment, communication, and decision-making during critical incidents.

④ Team and Community Effects

- Stress affects relationships with colleagues, family, and the community, potentially leading to burnout or reduced morale.

⑤ Importance of Early Recognition and Coping

- Understanding stress and trauma allows officers to use evidence-based strategies to maintain resilience, health, and operational effectiveness.

Stressed Defined

✦ Stress

A **physiological and psychological response** to demands or threats that challenge our ability to cope. Stress activates the body's alarm systems (fight, flight, freeze), and how we experience it depends on whether we *perceive* we can handle the demand. Brené Brown describes stress as what we feel **when the demands placed on us exceed our perceived capacity to cope**, especially under unpredictability, lack of control, and overload. [Brené Brown](#)

For first responders, stress is not just physical—it's how the mind and body react when the pressure of a situation feels beyond one's ability to manage effectively.

Why Stress Disconnects Us From Purpose

Your “why” gives meaning and energy to the job.

But under chronic stress, it can get buried.

When that happens:

- **Energy drops**
Work feels heavier. Motivation fades.
- **Decisions get harder**
Stress takes over. Reactions replace responses.
- **Connections weaken**
Team, family, and community strain.

Bottom line (bold):

Reconnecting with your “why” restores purpose, energy, and stronger relationships.

Emotions: Signals, Not Directives

We've been taught it's okay to be angry or pissed off... but not okay to be hurt.

- Painful emotions aren't “wrong” to feel
- Anger, frustration, sadness, fear all provide **valuable information**
- Courage is the willingness to **feel and respond intentionally**

Emotions give us information.

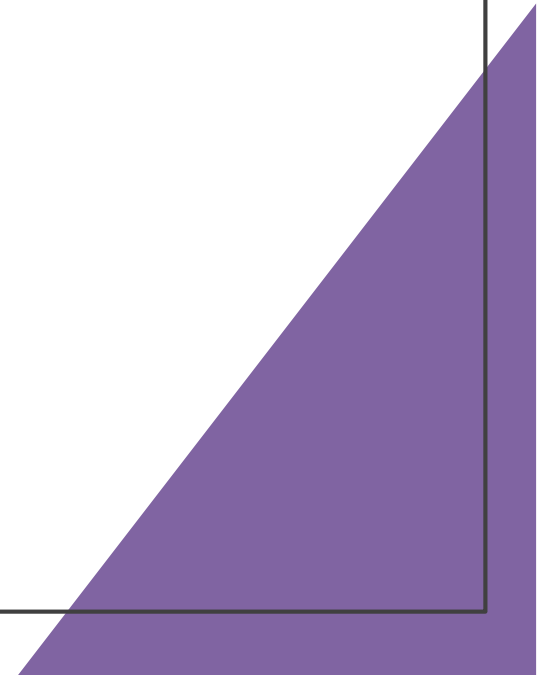
They tell us what's happening inside us and around us.

They can signal:

- What we value
- What we need
- What feels threatening or misaligned

Bottom line (bold):

Emotions are data — not directives.



— Armor vs. Fear *(How We Self-Protect)*

- It is not fear that gets in the way of us being brave.
- It's the armor we reach for when we feel afraid.
- Armor= coping mechanisms that may protect but also limit growth or connection
- Fear= natural response that can signal caution or readiness
- Awareness of the difference helps us respond intentionally, not react automatically



The Realities of the Job

- Police work involves physical and psychological dangers.
- Cumulative exposure can impact officers' mental well-being and physical health.
- These experiences are linked to traumatic stress symptoms, substance use, depression, and suicidal ideation.



The Sponge: Emotional Capacity

- The sponge represents our emotional capacity our ability to absorb, hold, and process life's experiences.
- 3-6 trauma exposures in a lifetime
- Over 200 in a 30-year career

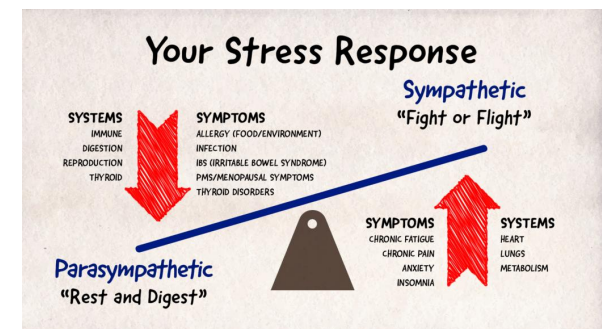


When the Stress Response Doesn't Shut Off

- Stress isn't just the event
- It's the **unfinished biological response**
- The body stays on high alert
- The loop keeps repeating

Bottom line:

This is why rest alone doesn't always fix it.

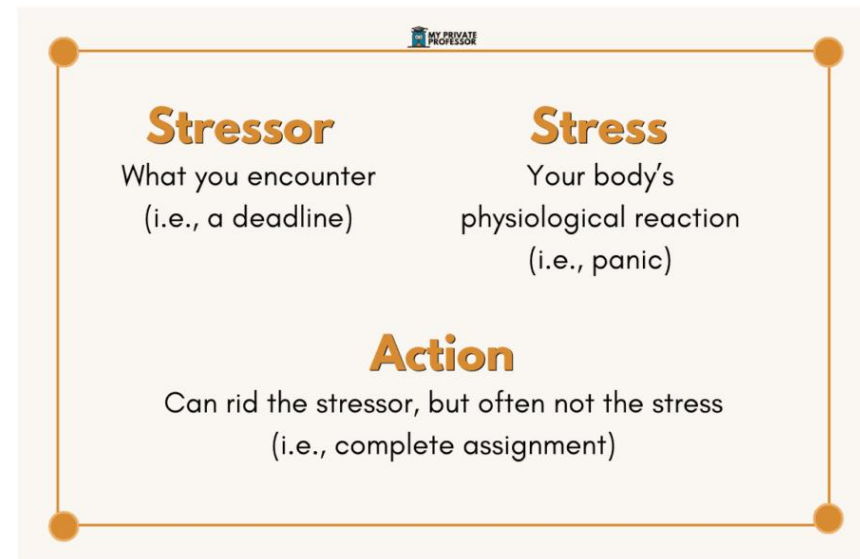


Stressors End, Stress Stays

Question it answers:

What does my body actually need?

- Clarifies that thinking isn't enough
- Introduces physical and relational closure
- Prepares audience for tools



From Stress to Trauma

- Stress is the body's response to pressure; temporary and manageable
- Trauma = stress that overwhelms coping capacity
- Can result from a single event or repeated exposure

Trauma Defined

✦ Trauma

A **deeper, lasting physiological and psychological imprint** left when the activation of the stress response system is extreme, prolonged, or unpredictable. Trauma isn't defined only by the event itself, but by how the **event affects the person's nervous system and sense of safety** long after it's over. Brené Brown's perspective (shared in discussions on trauma and resilience) highlights that trauma involves not just the event but the **experience of it and the lingering effects** on the person's stress response system. [Brené Brown](#)

Trauma can occur from single catastrophic events or repeated, uncontrollable activation of stress systems that alter how the brain and nervous system function over time.

Types of Trauma

- Single Critical Incident: high-impact, intense experience (shooting, major accident)
- Cumulative/Repeated Exposure: repeated calls or incidents over a career
- Secondary/Vicarious Trauma: absorbing others' trauma through work

Impact of Trauma on First Responders

- Emotional: anxiety, irritability, anger, numbness
- Cognitive: impaired memory, attention, decision-making
- Physical: fatigue, sleep disruption, headaches, weakened immune system
- Relational: strain on team, family, and community connections

You Can't Pour From an Empty Glass



Don't Shoot the Second Arrow

1. The First Arrow (Unavoidable)

The Call. The Incident. The Pressure.

- Stressful calls
- Trauma exposure
- Public scrutiny
- Split-second decisions

Key line (italic or lighter font):

This is the pain you can't control.



You ~~Good~~: Unspoken Rules

- “You’re good.” A phrase that meant more than it seemed.
- Unspoken expectations. The silent rules we were expected to follow.
- Growing up this way. How we learned to process—or hide—emotions.



Don't Shoot the Second Arrow

This **first arrow** is *the pain you can't control.*

It's the unexpected breakup.

The harsh comment online.

The disappointment you didn't see coming.

Pain is part of the human experience – even the

So the first arrow is *life's hit.*

You can't avoid it.

But what happens next is everything.



Don't Shoot the Second Arrow Cont'd

The second arrow is the story you tell yourself about the first one."

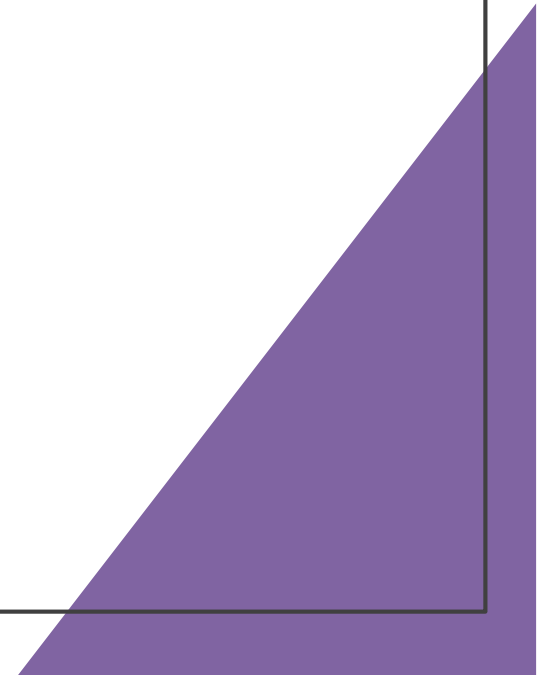
That's when your mind goes:

- "I'll never be enough."
- "I always mess things up."
- "Why does this *always* happen to me?"



Reframing Adversity

1. You're stronger than you thought.
2. You didn't just survive, you grew.



Reframing Adversity – Growth and Grace

- Challenges Build You: “You realize maybe that challenge wasn’t meant to break you. Maybe it was meant to build you. You faced what you feared and you’re still standing



A hiker with a large backpack is captured mid-jump, clearing a rock. The hiker is wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt, blue shorts, and a backpack. The background is a clear, light blue sky. The text "RESILIENCE: THE KEY TO SUCCESS" is overlaid in purple on the left side of the image.

RESILIENCE: THE KEY TO SUCCESS

- Resilience is your ability to adapt, recover, and grow stronger in the face of stress, challenges, or adversity. It's not about avoiding hardship but about responding effectively to it.

Resilience

- Having the skills to navigate adversity and grow in the face of challenges, also known as resilience, can lead to improved mental health and physical wellness.
- In law enforcement, resilience can be viewed as the ability to adapt to and overcome the effects of the stress and trauma associated with police work.



Resiliency Strategies for Law Enforcement

Staying Effective Under Pressure

A photograph showing the silhouettes of three people climbing a dark, rocky mountain peak. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright, golden glow that illuminates the scene from behind. The sky is filled with soft, wispy clouds. The overall mood is one of perseverance and triumph.

**RESILIENCE:
THE ART OF THRIVING**

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Why Resilience Matters



- Policing is unpredictable, high-pressure, and cumulative
- Stress doesn't always come from one big incident
- Resilience protects:
 - Decision-making
 - Emotional control
 - Long-term health
- This is about performance and survival, not weakness

What Resilience Is (and Isn't)

Resilience IS:

- The ability to recover, adapt, and keep functioning
- A skill that can be strengthened

Resilience IS NOT:

- Ignoring stress
- “Toughing it out” alone
- Never being affected

Affirming Inner Strengths

You already use resilience every shift

- You make decisions with limited information
- You manage emotions in tense situations
- You show up despite risk and uncertainty
- These are **trained strengths**, not accidents

Key Point:

You wouldn't still be here if you weren't resilient.

Reframing Adversity as Preparation

Stressful experiences are part of the job — but how we interpret them matters.

Instead of:

- “This is breaking me”

Try:

- “This is training me”
- “What did this prepare me for?”

Reframing does **not** mean pretending it didn't hurt.

Adversity → Capability

Examples officers relate to:

- Tough calls → sharper instincts
- Mistakes → better tactics
- High stress → improved emotional control

Pressure builds capability — if we learn from it

Practicing Compassionate Self-Talk

Your internal voice matters more than you think.

Harsh self-talk:

- Increases stress
- Undermines confidence
- Prolongs emotional impact

Compassionate self-talk:

- Keeps you regulated
- Supports recovery
- Improves performance

Change the Language

Instead of:

- “I screwed that up.”
- “I should’ve known better.”

Try:

- “I made the best decision with what I had.”
- “I’ll take the lesson and move forward.”

Rule of thumb:

If you wouldn’t say it to your partner, don’t say it to yourself.

Putting It Together

Resiliency is built by:

- Recognizing your strengths
- Learning from adversity
- Managing your internal dialogue

This is about staying:

- Sharp
- Effective

Final Takeaway

- Resilience is a skill, not a personality trait
- You already have the foundation
- Small mindset shifts make a real operational difference

Strong officers take care of their strength.

You Are Enough



INFORMATION

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