

How to improve officer training for high-risk traffic stops

The problem with ever-increasing stress during critical incidents such as a HRTS is found in an associated decrease in critical thinking abilities

As seen in [PoliceOne.Com](#) by Dave Blake

You're behind that stolen Honda Civic from this morning's roll call. The important information has been relayed to dispatch and cover units are en route. You've got this — it's as simple as 1,2,3. You hit the lights and siren, the driver pulls over, you're positioned perfectly, and you're out, gun up and giving commands as units start to fill to the right and left. As they do, you smell the brakes burning, hear sirens blaring and multiple voices yelling, and pure pandemonium seems to break out.

It's about this time you realize the high risk traffic stop (HRTS) isn't progressing like standard procedure. Police vehicles are not in that nice fan pattern set up for us in training, officers may be in the wrong positions, no one has deployed a less lethal option, and there are multiple officers giving commands.

We all know this happens and performance ranges from bad to catastrophic in some situations. While we are aware of the high stress associated with the HRTS, we rarely explore the human errors committed in this high stress environment unless there is a catastrophic failure. The need to explore and address human error under high stress (fight or flight) should be accomplished before that failure.

Making Decisions Under Stress

We rarely — if ever — ask ourselves why a HRTS, so artfully conducted in a training environment, becomes something of a mess during real world situations. Partial blame may be placed on the "fight or flight" response. "Fight or flight" defines a complicated physiological stress response associated with an individual officer's perception of his/her environment. The fight or flight stress response can increase greatly as HRTS procedures veer significantly from the expected normal method.

Most deviations from the norm can be attributed to individual rapid decision-making during perceived time constraints. These procedural errors only exacerbate the stress for the entire team as the HRTS strays further from what they have trained and/or are used to. The problem with ever-increasing stress during critical incidents such as a HRTS is found in an associated decrease in [critical thinking abilities](#).

When we become stressed at significant levels, cortisol and many other hormones are released which impair the critical thinking area of the brain (frontal lobes). Here is one potential cause for the HRTS to begin to fall apart: Cortisol levels [most likely rise](#) as soon as an officer learns they are behind a stolen vehicle. Once the HRTS begins to unfold, responding officers are likely experiencing individual stress response variations with increased heart rate, loss of fine motor skills, tunneling of vision and auditory occlusion.

However, it is the cognitive effects of fight or flight that may limit our ability to use the critical thinking skills required within a HRTS. This is also where human error can increase from simple misalignment of a vehicle to a serious mistake resulting in injury or loss of life.

Adding Reality & Stress to HRTS Training

I've [previously written](#) that stress inoculation in training is important to help officers' performance under stress — and the HRTS is no different. In my experience, I've seen a lot of HRTS training that started with vehicles all set up and student officers being assigned to this "already stopped" vehicle. They then calmly move through the structure of the HRTS procedure. The critical aspect of arriving on scene under stress, making initial critical decisions, and moving to deescalate are all missed in this training method.

Just as we no longer use static range training, we shouldn't use static HRTS training. Unrealistic training does little to reduce acute stress deficits in the real world and can even add to elevated stress under certain circumstances.

Trainers should endeavor to create a realistic situation on a closed course where lights and sirens are used and officers are able to drive to the termination point. Radio traffic providing descriptions and setting up responding units is critical to include. Once at a termination point and primary tasks are completed — officers acquire cover, weapons down range, primary officer gains compliance (suspect hands on head) — the situation can and should deescalate.

Here lies a critical training point: this is where the opportunity to lower acute stress experienced by all officers involved. Train primary officers to use this time to establish leadership and communicate — slow down, deescalate, reposition, and deploy additional resources. These steps will downgrade the stress response and allow the critical thinking portion of the brain to re-engage.

The meat of the HRTS is from this point on, where decision-making, coordinated motor movement, and global attention are most important.

Conclusion

Society is placing increasing demands on the law enforcement officer as they look at an officer's decisions before, during, and after a critical incident. We know many of these decisions are made under high stress and train diligently to perform in these situations. However, we often do not consider the human aspect of performance under stress. The scientific community has provided many answers that can help us perform during critical incidents — answers we should use to help us train, help us respond, and help us win!

Be vigilant. Be safe.

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