

Operational Stress in Military, Police & First Responders

Recognizing the effects of repeated responsibility, threat exposure, critical incidents, and chronic activation.

This resource is written to respect service culture while acknowledging that chronic activation has real psychological and physiological costs.

What operational stress can look like

High-stress service roles may involve repeated exposure to danger, suffering, responsibility, unpredictable shifts, moral conflict, and pressure to perform under stress. Reactions can include irritability, emotional numbing, sleep disruption, hypervigilance, intrusive memories, increased alcohol use, relationship distance, or feeling unable to “turn off.”

Protective habits that can become costly

- Scanning constantly for danger off duty.
- Using alcohol or substances to force sleep or shut down emotion.
- Withdrawing because civilians “would not understand.”
- Overworking to avoid quiet or memories.
- Treating emotional needs as weakness rather than information.

Skills that can help

- Create an intentional transition ritual between duty and home.
- Use peer support with people who understand the culture and can also challenge unhealthy coping.
- Protect sleep routines as much as shift work allows.
- Notice when humor, detachment, or control stops being adaptive and starts affecting relationships.
- Seek trauma-informed professional support before symptoms become unmanageable.

Try this reflection

What is one behavior that helps you function on duty but creates problems when it follows you home?

Using this resource: For education and skill-building only; not diagnosis, medical advice, or crisis care. If you feel overwhelmed, pause and seek appropriate professional support. In the U.S., call or text 988 for crisis support; call 911 for an immediate emergency.