

## CHAPTER FOUR

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### The difference between Police and Dispatcher Stress

As I said many jobs have their share of stress, and the people that work in them get stressed. From the waitress/waiter in a restaurant to the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, everyone has stress or pressure on them because of what they do. Again stress is a part of life. So what makes the stress that 911 Dispatchers deal with all that different? More to the point, just what is “dispatcher stress”?

When we say “dispatcher stress” we are of course referring to the stress that dispatchers face on the job, but more specifically we are talking about those unique stressors, which differentiate them from other occupations.

If you are an internet-savvy person you might have tried to read up a little on the subject of Dispatcher Stress. However, if you did you were surprised to learn how very little there has been written on it. In fact, most of what you will find deals with the stress of police officers and other high stress jobs like Air Traffic Controllers, Nurses, etc. Not that you can't draw some very good conclusions and parallels from them, but we want to be able to identify with the different types of stressors we Dispatchers alone face.

I know that about ten-years ago when I began to research the subject I couldn't seem to find anything of substance on Dispatcher Stress. So I had to read about other high stress jobs like Police Officer, Firefighter, and then combine what I learned with what I knew about dispatching.

While there are comparisons between the stress that Police Officers and Dispatchers face, there are also marked difference, and one specific difference in the type of stress dispatchers face on the job. Primarily the difference is one of **experience**.

### **THE EXPERIENTIAL DIFFERENCE**

The stress that police officers often face is experienced "face-to-face", on the road, in the mean streets. They meet the bad guys; they see and interact with the public. They are on the scene of accidents, disasters, and domestic disturbances. They see the "humanity" in vivid detail.

Yet we know it to be true that Dispatchers are - unless a call has been on-viewed by an officer on the road- technically the first to be "on-scene" of most incidents. That's because before officers show up someone usually calls 911 or at least the non-emergency line to report the incident.

The dispatcher isn't going to respond to the call physically, but must decide within certain guidelines, what is going on, where it is happening, what units to send, what priority to send them, what info responding units must have to keep themselves safe on the call.

All of this decision-making takes place within a relatively short period of time and all while the dispatcher has no visual frame of

reference, because unlike a police officer that gets the “visual reference”, the dispatcher has only “sounds” to go by.



When you are taking calls for assistance all you really have is what you hear on the phone. For instance, you pick up the 911 line and there is a woman screaming, or there is a bunch of people yelling in the background. Or sometimes you don't have anyone on the line but you can hear noises or gunshots, or traffic sounds. Because you don't have a visual on what is going on you have to rely on what you are hearing. You take what you hear and then determine what course of action to take. Sometimes what you hear isn't what you get!



Again, if you hear your child scream at home, you jump up and run to see what is happening, only to find out that they have fallen down and scraped a knee. That's bad, but if you have kids you know that is common. Yet before you saw what had happened you might have imagined the worst. So sometimes your imagination far out-weighs what is really happening.

Now this can happen to police officers as well – on the way to the call as they prepare themselves mentally on what they will face when they arrive. They no doubt imagine all kinds of things, so that they can prepare themselves for what is going to happen when they get there. This is actually quite natural and very human. Then when the officer arrives the “picture” becomes clearer as they see what is really going on. Perhaps the call wasn't as bad as reported, or maybe it was worse, but at least they get a kind of closure.

Yet for the dispatcher many times there is no such closure. Sometimes even when you are told what has happened afterwards, and if you are like me you try to find out, you still won't have a complete picture. It's just not the same as "being there". A lot of times you aren't told what happened and this too can cause problems, as it is important to get closure when we are involved in a critical event. But as you know we aren't always in the "loop" so to speak. I've always wondered about why some dispatchers wanted to see photos of accidents or crime scenes. This was illustrated once during a seminar I attended on Crime Scene Responder. Most of the class was attended by dispatchers and to a person everyone wanted to really focus on those photos. Those grisly photos. Why? Simply closure.

Even though in this class none of the people there had anything to do with those calls begin viewed, we all have a need for closure. We are also a voyeur society and we like sometimes to see the carnage – strange but true. That's why people love to watch the news coverage of famous trials and flocked to the Internet to witness those awful beheadings committed by terrorist lately. In all humans there is this strong need to "see" something, to live it, to witness it.

But as a dispatcher you are most times handling calls that are violent, mean and nasty, yet you don't get to "see it" happening. Therefore because there is no visual reference there is a subsequent "void" created. To fill this void we use our imagination to create a "picture" that helps us to assimilate the information we are hearing. Even in the mist of a domestic call while you have the complainant on the line, you are no doubt "imagining" the scene you are hearing. If the complainant screams your mind will form a picture of what you believe to be going on.

Again, sometimes the pictures you have of a call can conflict with what is actually going on. For instance, how many times have you dispatched a call, thinking you have obtained all the information, you were quite sure of what was happening, only to have the officer tell you after the call that what he saw was more or less different that you understood? It kind of irks you doesn't it? When this happens you might have responded:

“Well, the complainant didn't tell me that!”

We all know that happens a lot, just part of the job. But many other times we might have just created a bigger reality than there was the case. Of course how well you handle the call and assign the correct "meaning" to it call will depend a lot on your training and experience. A new dispatcher might not fully understand what is going on because they don't have the experience yet. They haven't completely formed that all-important "instinct" that dispatchers sometimes refer to. The more seasoned dispatcher might recognize the problem at the beginning.

However whether a new dispatcher or more experienced dispatcher, without sight or seeing what is going on you still have to form some type of “picture” of what is going on. This picture that is most often more wrong than right thankfully; as you know you and I sometimes you don't get it right and we've all been there.

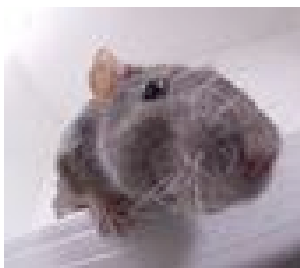
For instance, sometimes a complainant might sound like they are crying, but later you find out later they were laughing. They may be screaming like they are being murdered and it may be just because they were scared of something they saw, like a mouse.

Of course we're supposed to assume certain things based mainly on what is said. For instance when you get a call and hear, "My husband hit me", well you know that is going to be a Domestic Call you send help. Or you have a Mother on the phone screaming, "My baby is choking!" Again, you know what kind of call that is; you give instructions and or send EMS. Also many times if we can't really understand what is going on we go by the old saying; "Let the Officer get the story when they are on scene". So we use our mind, our imagination, our experience, and training to try to get the help where it is needed.

Our imagination can be our greatest ally or worst enemy sometimes, again, because a lot of times we can picture MORE than what is going on. Let me ask a question. How many times did an officer respond to what you thought was a really crazy call only to have them clear it in minutes writing any report? The officer arrived and before you knew it they cleared the call. "What the???" You thought.

Again, there was a conflict in what you heard and what they actually saw when they got there.

### **THE CASE OF THE KILLER MOUSE!**



Let's say you get a 911 call from a lady who is screaming her head off. You try to calm her down, you know, get the information, but it is of no use, she is inconsolable. So you dispatch the officer, probably several. They arrive, then minutes later they clear the call, and you detect a little chuckle in the officer's voice.

So being a little confused you ask the officer call you on the land-line to tell you what happened to that screaming lady you heard.

When they call the officer tells you that the woman was screaming because of what turned out to be a mouse that had gotten into the house. “A Mouse?” You query. “Yep, it was a little white mouse” the Officer continues, “Belongs to her kid, it got loose” “Man, you should have seen her jump....HA!”

At this point you might have felt a little embarrassed that you gave an alert-tone for a priority-one response for the call. But who knew? After all you pick up the 911 line and this lady is screaming her head off. You try to calm her, use controlling language, “Mamn, MAMN! You Have to stop screaming, and tell me what is going on!” She wouldn't calm down, and you did what you had to do, what you were trained to do - you sent help.

Yet now you feel a little foolish. “A mouse – indeed!” You mutter under your breath.

But what did you know, she was screaming so loudly and so inconsolable that you thought she was being murdered. Heck, if she hadn't called on the 911 line, you wouldn't even have had an address to send somebody to, she was that hysterical!

But again you had nothing to go on but what you were hearing. The sounds of screaming, the inconsolable, hysterical, and unintelligible ramblings of that poor woman whose world came crashing down because of Stuart Little's visit.

Now this happened time and time again to me as a dispatcher. There were lots of calls that sounded that they needed immediate

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response only to find out it wasn't even written up. After a while you get kind of "jaded" or suspicious. If you have been at the console you might identify. You can get hard to "fool". But every now and then "Got-Ya!"

You also need to know that while you were taking the call your body experienced a reaction, which I will describe in greater detail a little later, called the "Alert Response". For now you can know that your body experienced the ancient response of "fight or flight" while you took the call and dispatched it. This response will be greater or lesser depending on how you deal with stress, yet everyone will have had some type of reaction. Yet this reaction you had was all about a mouse. You see it doesn't matter if the event is real or imagined, if your mind perceives it as a threatening situation then your body is going to react to it.

Again, most of the time our imagination can serve us well and it is absolutely essential to helping us determine the proper course of action. Yet sometimes it can increase the situation beyond all measure – in our mind.