

CHAPTER FIVE



Exploring the Specifics of Dispatcher Stress

As a 911 Dispatcher your job is to take calls for emergency and non-emergency assistance, then decide a proper response and send appropriate units. Yet after one call is done you get another call, and still another call, and yet another call and that cycle continually repeats throughout the shift. The workload may vary. Sometimes you have one call after another during the entire shift, and other times it can be as slow as – *opps, didn't mean to jinx your shift*, but you know what I mean.

When it is busy, you sometimes have to what we call “multi-task” to get everything accomplished. For instance, you know that certain calls will have you doing other tasks like background checks, and other paperwork involved in an arrest after a traffic stop. Depending on your department you may also issue the arrest number and assist with the booking of the prisoner as well as other assigned duties.

All the time you are doing this there are still other calls for help coming in, as well as officers asking for things for you do for them. Remember Officer Doolittle?

How many times have you been completely swamped with requests, calls, distractions and found yourself, yelling out; “Hey! I’ve only got two hands!” As officers do tend to get impatient, and demand their stuff right now. All of it can really get on your nerves, and sometimes it seems like no one wants to give you a break. The calls keep coming; the demands on you to keep up with them keep increasing. Before you know it the whole shift has gone by, and you feel like a truck has hit you. Some times you go home tired, worn-out and exhausted.

The Incredible Juggling Dispatcher!



“I can't stop.”

I mentioned multi-tasking before, or as I have heard it more appropriately called, “MANIC-TASKING”, because sometimes it just gets that crazy doesn’t it? There are so many things that you have to juggle and keep in line to do your job. Sometimes the calls can come in such rapid succession that you and your partner quickly find yourselves swamped. I have been in those situations many times where even reinforcements (off duty dispatchers, etc) had to be called in to help during really busy times. Sadly most of the time this wasn’t the case, and we just had to “deal with it” with the limited staff we had. Yeah it gets REAL crazy. But that is the nature of the job isn’t it? Sure it is, and it isn’t always that bad. Just like in any job there are good days and bad aren’t there?

Multi-tasking is an indispensable skill in 911 Dispatching, but it is also the reason that so many dispatchers burn out so quickly. After all, we’re only human. We can do two or three things at once, but we can’t do

EVERYTHING at once. But at times it seems like it's EVERYTHING that everybody wants us to do.



TECHNO-STRESS

The nature of 911 Dispatching has really changed over the last twenty or so. Dispatchers who have been at the console ten, fifteen, twenty years can remember a world of dispatching on header cards with the only real tech being a Teletype terminal. Others can remember a time even before there were header cards! Sure they were just as busy and just as stressed back then because the same external and internal stressors were present, but the new technology while streamlining and organizing your tasks can add to the pressure you experience. It also increases the multitasking you have to do.

Today's Dispatch Center can have a computer aided dispatch system (CAD) in addition to other technological marvels. That is where



the term "Techno-Stress" has been coined to refer to the stress that is introduced with technology. The world is full of technology today and with all its advantages there comes the drawback of increased stress.

As I said before, dispatchers don't only just dispatch units to calls; there are lots of other duties you perform as well. For instance, if your center is short-handed you might also double as a call taker, handling both the phones and the radio. Some dispatch centers have cameras to monitor prisoners or the building, and guess who has to monitor them? Bingo! You may have four, five, six, or more of

these cameras that come with a soothing “buzzer” that you have to answer to let personnel into different doors in the department.

I have heard of dispatchers who even book prisoners and take the photos, and help perform searches along with clerical duties for the administration. You know, *“Hey, I know that you are handling an armed robbery call, but do you have that letter the Chief wanted typed yet?”*

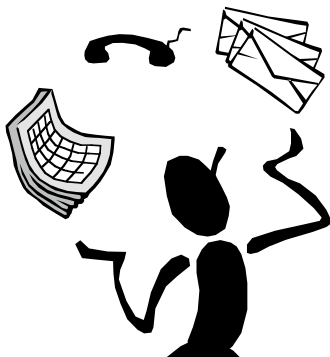
Maybe you even have a “Senior Citizen Health and Welfare Call System” that automatically calls an elderly subscriber daily at a set time to find out if they are OK. If there is no answer or if they are in distress you get an alert on your CAD and have to send help to them.

Of course many of you also have multi-channel radio systems, Geographical Mapping Systems, Records Management Systems, and Automatic Vehicle Location Systems to deal with as well.

You might even have interagency duties like monitoring systems for the public works department to catch alerts from the flood control system like we did where I worked.

Add to this the Mobile Data Terminal Systems that many agencies have, where officers have their own little CAD’s in their car, and other “bells and whistles” that have come along with technological advances and you have a lot of information coming at you, much more than the

dispatchers of the past had.



**WARNING! INFORMATION
OVERLOAD!**

Because of this there can be an “information overload” where it can easily seem at times that you feel you just cannot absorb one more thing. Just like the camel, just one more straw is going to break his back. Your brain feels like a Jell-O in your head, and at the end of the shift all you want to do is go home, lie down and close your eyes and go to sleep. That’s if you get to go home at all because someone might call out sick and you have to hang over four hours or even worse work the shift yourself. Yeah, there is a whole lot on the plate for dispatchers these days.

WORK DEMANDS

All these duties and responsibilities represent “Work-Demands”. Quite often agencies make the mistake of overloading the dispatch center with so many duties that other primary duties suffer. Again, you’re only human and you can only process so much information at a time.

You’ll remember that stress is defined pressure to cope, adapt, and adjust to it, so that the more demands that are placed on you – the more pressure, subsequently the more coping, adapting, and adjusting you have to do. Subsequently, understanding the amount of work that is demanded of you in your job is the key to understanding how you can cope with the job.

PRIMARY SKILLS AND ABILITIES OF DISPATCHERS

Along with the skill of multitasking that I mentioned above there are other specific skills and abilities that every dispatcher should have. Indeed some of these you saw on in your job description when you applied but you might not have known what they were. Depending on how strong these skills are in each of us will determine how well we are able to cope. They are:

Stress and the Dispatcher – Surviving the Console

Situation monitoring

Resolving Conflicts

Managing Radio Control

Prioritizing and Routing calls

In addition have to have certain cognitive/sensory abilities such as:

Spatial scanning (being able to monitor all the happenings of your surroundings, such as seeing a 911 line light up while you are occupied with another call. In essence it is being aware of everything going on around you.)

Visual and Verbal filtering (refers to disseminating pertinent data from both visual and verbal sources)

If all that wasn't enough, you have to possess the following:

Investigative Skills

Coding and decoding

Inductive and Deductive reasoning

Short and long term memory

Probabilistic reasoning

All of these skills and abilities require a great amount of mental energy and stamina. But they accurately reflect the nature of 911 Dispatching, because at times it seems that you are doing a hundred and one things at once – *because that is exactly what is happening!*

The workload demand on each of these skills is increased the more duties you have to perform.



You've got to Keep Those Plates Spinning!

Being a Dispatcher reminds me a lot of the guy on stage whose act it is to spin plates on sticks. Have you ever seen that? He gets one plate spinning on a stick, then when that is going he sets up another, and after that still another until he has four or five of them all spinning on sticks. Then he goes back to number one and gives it a little spin to keep it going, then two, then number three and so on. Then the audience applauds!

The idea is that if he lets up on any one they could all come crashing to the floor!

I know that sometimes you might feel like that guy spinning all the plates all shift long. You might even have some plates spinning at home, and elsewhere. You've got to keep those going too, so that before you know it you are doing nothing but spinning plates all day long and hoping to keep them going long enough to complete the day without a crash.



Now all this spinning can make you dizzy and wear you out, unless you know how to cope with it. If not, you can reach that breaking point we talked about before, just like the pencil.

ROLE-RELATED STRESSORS

As we identified before, CONFLICT is a main source of stress. Conflict can both internal and external, as we can have conflict with other people or even within ourselves. Most conflict that we experience comes

from within the workplace, where there are specific conflicts/stressors that are “Role-Related” and are broken down into three areas. They are:

- *Inter-role conflicts*
- *Intra-role conflicts*
- *Person-role conflicts*

Inter-role conflict refers to what happens when you have competing roles in the same job. For instance, you may have additional duties to that of a dispatcher such as assisting with prisoner processing, or performing other clerical duties that sometimes take you away from, or at least interfere with what you feel are your primary duties.

Perhaps you have been assigned to work on a special project for the Chief, and the time devoted to that may detract from your duties as dispatcher. You might feel “torn” between two duties, equally important, and might even resent the pressure it has placed on you. Sometimes this can cause conflict with other dispatchers too as they become resentful as you ask them to your “cover” duties while you “work for the Chief”.

Intra-role conflict can occur when you are told two different ways to do the same task. This kind of role conflict occurs frequently in the dispatcher’s workplace. For instance, in a dispatch center you usually have more than one supervisor. This has its own inherent problems when communication “glitches” occur between them. For instance, one supervisor tells you to handle a call one way while another supervisor on another shift gives you completely different instructions. Or perhaps the sergeant of one road team wants you to dispatch calls in a certain way for “his people”, while another team sergeant wants you to handle his team’s

calls in an entirely different way. There are many times you might have said, *“I just wish we’d all get on the same sheet of music!”*

Combine this with the “fear of failure” that is in every dispatch environment and it can create tension as you try to perform one exact task two different ways.

This type of stressor is especially so for new dispatchers who are struggling to “get it”. After a while of this duality they may not be sure just how things run.

Personal Role Stressors: Conflict isn’t just at work, balancing your job and personal life can be tricky as well, especially when you have children or other family members to take care of and still have to handle the demands of shift work and long hours. Missing out on birthday’s and baseball games, dancing lessons, can get to you after a while.

Finding the time to devote to doing your job while still attending to the needs of your family or mate and getting important time to take care of yourself is the key. The word is “Balance”.

Now all these Role-Related Stressors add to and compound the already native stressors to the job of dispatching. The following is a list of common stressors that affect all dispatchers no matter where they work, or whether the agency is large or small. These come from both the Internal and External category of stressor and they are the ones we are all familiar with.

COMMON STRESSORS FOR DISPATCHERS

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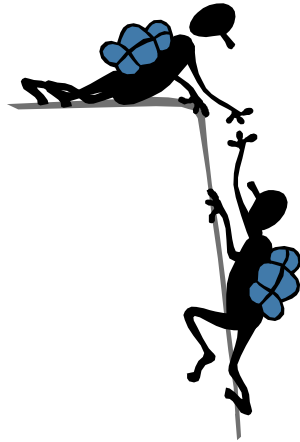
- *Long Hours*
- *Rotating Shifts*
- *Critical Calls: Domestic calls, Pursuits, etc.*
- *Expectations of superiors, co-workers, and self*
- *Lack of positive reinforcement, quick negative reinforcement*
- *Lack of adequate nutrition and exercise*
- *Monotony (Same old routine) Especially for veteran dispatchers*
- *Change of Procedures, Management changes*

Sometimes dispatchers think that just because they work in a small agency they do not experience the stressors experienced by the larger agencies. However the size of the organization matters little because the experience of stress is relative to individuals within their environment. You could be a single dispatcher in a small department with five units on the road and yet your stress is comparable with a dispatcher in a large metropolitan area that is handling twenty units. It is all relative to YOUR experience.

All the above stressors above cover our “External” environment in Dispatching. There are also have some “Internal” sources of stress as well.

- *Feelings of helplessness*
- *Perceived lack of control*
- *No or little margin for error*
- *Lack of adequate breaks, days off, vacations*

I want to focus on these last four, as they cover the sources of stress that a lot of dispatchers cite when they are asked about the stress in the job.



FEELINGS OF HELPLESSNESS

When I dispatched there was one thing drilled into me from the start. “I am responsible!” I tried to keep that as the one thing that I would concentrate on during my career.

I know that you feel you are responsible too. 911 Dispatching is an incredibly responsible job. Yet that feeling of being responsible is the very thing that can lead sometimes to a feeling of helplessness. I am sure you have had a 9-1-1 call where a child is screaming for help and then hang up, and you had no address or callback number. Or maybe they couldn't give their address? It makes you feel helpless doesn't it?

Having an officer get injured while you're on the radio with him can also make you feel helpless. There is only so much you can do.

You can also feel helpless in less than emergency situations. Changes that are implemented on procedure and policy, changes in shift scheduling, can make you feel helpless as well. Sometimes you

can feel “toss to and fro” by the billows of the waves, helpless at what gets thrown at you.



The truth is that you can be responsible and yet you can't be responsible for everything. You have to know the difference between what you are responsible for and what you are not.

When roles are confused or not properly detailed it can be hard to know what your responsibilities are.

PERCEIVED LACK OF CONTROL

What can ultimately lead to feelings of helplessness is a sense that you have no control over your environment. In fact, not having control over a situation in itself increases the stress you will experience in that situation. It can make you fearful and fear absolutely stifles initiative, so important to be a successful dispatcher.

However you can't show initiative if you aren't allowed to make decisions and choices in “the heat of battle”.

The fact is that the more control you have, the less stress you are going to experience. For instance, if you get an unexpected bill in the mail the pressure to get it paid will be greater if you don't know where you are going to get the money. However, if you have the money, then you aren't going to be as stressed because you have more control

of what to do. The key here is that more control lessens the CONFLICT because conflict increases when there is a lack of control over the situation.

In your job you have many things that happen for which you have no control. I've mentioned a few of them like changes of policy and procedure and work schedules. But let's look at it a little further.



THE DIRECT RELATION BETWEEN CONTROL AND STRESS

In 1979 Dr. Robert A. Karasek, of the University of Massachusetts conducted studies on work-related design and stress. Here is a little bit about what he and his colleagues found.

“Early research by Karasek (1979) revealed that the amount of job decision latitude, or control, an employee had is related to the employee's ability to handle his or her workload. Karasek found that it was primarily workers with jobs simultaneously low in job decision latitude and high in job demands who reported exhaustion after work, trouble awakening in the morning, depression, nervousness, anxiety, and insomnia or disturbed sleep. This realization that occupational stressors can affect health and well-being has led to improvements in the workplace. For example, many organizations have implemented programs designed to enhance employee control.”

In the study the more control that these employees had over the way that they performed their job the less work-strain they

experienced. The less control they had the more strain they experienced.

The “Keyword” here is “Decision Latitude”, or the level of decision-making ability you have in your job. The more decision latitude, the less stress.

Many of the things that you do in dispatching are “written out” such as in a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), or in some policy directive. There doesn’t seem to be much of any decisions that you have to make. But as you know, SOP’s aren’t written to cover everything. Sometimes there are things that happen that you have to choose what to do; yet you don’t feel you have the “authority” to do so.

Some managers have an “authoritarian” style of management that doesn’t allow the people under them to make a decision without approval. The exception is where managers delegate authority to subordinate managers and supervisors. However, this only takes it down a notch, it still doesn’t empower the people at the ‘ground’ level.

What if you are on the midnight shift, and there is a situation that you need clarification on, and you can’t get hold of a supervisors? That’s right, your stress is going to go up.

Now, because of the critical nature of 911 dispatching and potential for liability, most managers want a “chain of responsibility” so that the “who did what and when” can be established when things go wrong.

Yet there are many, many little things that you do on a daily basis, which makes it redundant and unnecessary to always get direct approval for everything, such as holding non-emergency (cat in the tree) calls when all units are tied-up. This is a responsibility that can be delegated with little or no repercussions, and it gives control over an otherwise benign, but stressful common situation in dispatching.

For instance, in the center I worked at, it was the policy that you had to let the on-duty Sergeant know about any calls that were holding. On any typical day, especially during afternoon shift change this got to be a little ridiculous, especially for the Sergeant on duty who was trying to prepare his team at role-call.

So that at that incredibly busy time we were “stacking calls”, telling the Sergeant of each one as it came in. – knowing that no calls were going out until there was an available unit.

So we changed the rule and allowed the dispatchers to hold non-emergency calls for fifteen-minutes before notifying the Sergeant. It was really just a little thing, but it made a big difference because it gave us something we never had before – control over our workflow.

Now of course emergency calls were still handled in the same way, as always, but on any given moment our ratio of non-emergency to emergency calls was at best eight-to-two. So this significantly reduced the amount of demand and radio traffic as well.

There are probably more examples you can implement in regards to policy and procedure to allow more decision latitude to dispatchers and so reduce the stress they experience.

LITTLE OR NO MARGIN FOR ERROR



As I mentioned there is little or no room for error in 911 dispatching. Because of this there is a lot of tension about “not something screwing up”. In fact in some Communications Centers you could cut the tension with a knife.

Of course how much tension is there depends on how errors are dealt with by management. If mistakes and errors are dealt with severely it will add to the tension. If there is a more balanced, fair approach, then there will be less tension. After all, no one likes to make an error and get into trouble, especially so if you know you are going to get “your head chopped off” in the process.

This is especially true if “negative reinforcement” or punishment outweighs any “positive reinforcement”. If there is no balance between the two then it only increases the fear of failing. There are some managers who think this is a good thing that people “know what is going to happen”, so that they keep on their toes!

However in my experience when the focus is on “not making mistakes”, it only increases the occurrence of such.

If people know that there is a balance between “good and bad” and that punishment is meted justly and fairly, it decreases the fear that they will be hammered for the slightest infraction.

THE LACK OF BREAKS, VACATIONS, and DAYS OFF

Dispatchers often cite the lack of breaks or days off and vacations as a significant problem within their centers. I remember well eating at my position for most of my career. There is nothing like trying to answer an officer on the radio with a mouthful of pizza, but hey, you got to eat.

In my center we simply didn't have the staff to get breaks because we were continually short handed.

This is the problem that many of you have across the country. You can't keep going forever, in fact, your body demands 'down-time' every once in a while. Yet when your center has a shortage problem it becomes very difficult to schedule breaks and allow vacations. Then as people get burned out from no time off they leave and so the circle continues.

Still, if you don't give your body and mind adequate rest it is going to have a negative affect on you. Later, in the chapter on coping I will give you some tips on “breaking” even when you don't have breaks.

For now if you are a supervisor struggling with this in your center, know that even if you haven't got the people to fully staff

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shifts, people still need time to rest and recuperate. The vicious cycle will only continue, but you can slow it down by just being a little inventive in the way you schedule and plan the operation of your dispatch center.