

Positive personality traits may protect police at high risk for PTSD

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Personal traits such as resilience, satisfaction with life and a grateful disposition may help shield police officers from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the aftermath of a natural disaster.

This is the case even though repeated exposure to traumatic events has been found to provoke PTSD and [police officers](#) are exposed repeatedly to traumatic events.

These are the conclusions of a new study that looked at police officers in the New Orleans area during and in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The results suggested that they were shielded from PTSD by the protective qualities not only in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, but years later as well.

"We found that symptoms of PTSD significantly decreased among subjects as resilience, satisfaction with life and gratitude increased," says researcher John Violanti, PhD, professor of epidemiology and environmental health at the University at Buffalo and an internationally known expert on police stress. "This also was true among officers—excluded from the study—who did not work during the hurricane.

"This study extends our understanding of how positive factors are associated with reduced PTSD symptoms, and can inform and guide treatment modalities for PTSD," Violanti says.

The research was conducted using a grant from The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), part of the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Violanti and several NIOSH researchers are among the authors.

The recent cross-sectional study, "Positive Psychological Factors are Associated with Lower PTSD Symptoms in Police Officers: Post Hurricane Katrina," is published online in a December special issue edition of the journal *Stress and Health*.

The authors point out that the severity of symptoms and risk of PTSD are associated with such factors as the severity of the disaster, degree of exposure, personal losses and even how one behaved during the event. Following Katrina, the study says, police officers faced a number of physical and psychological challenges and many reported having to

conduct their duties - crowd control, looting control, rescuing victims in flooded areas, body retrieval - while facing open hostility from the citizens they were trying to aid, sometimes in the form of assault and being shot at.

"About 50 percent of the general population in the U.S. has been exposed to at least one traumatic event involving actual or threatened death, serious injury or other terrifying situations," Violanti says. "Five to six percent of them will develop PTSD while others will cope pretty well.

"Police officers, however, are at significantly higher risk than the general public because PTSD is more likely among those repeatedly exposed to trauma," he says, "and between 9 and 19 percent of police will develop PTSD, indicating both a higher rate of occurrence than in the general public and greater variability in risk."

In one survey, eight weeks after the hurricane, 19 percent of the officers reported symptoms that met the criteria for PTSD. The aim of this new study was to find out if personal qualities found to protect the general public from PTSD also mitigated symptoms in this high-risk population.

The protective personal qualities under consideration here were resilience, the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; satisfaction with life; post-traumatic personal growth, that is, psychological shifts in thinking and relating to the world that contribute to deeply meaningful change; and a grateful disposition, which is associated with positive affect and well-being, prosocial behaviors and other qualities.

The 114 study participants were 84 male and 30 female police officers in the New Orleans area who worked as officers during and after Hurricane Katrina.

"In this sample, unlike in studies of civilian populations, an experience of posttraumatic personal growth did not appear to mitigate PTSD symptoms in police officers, though the other three protective characteristics we studied did," Violanti says.

He elaborates on the study's results: "As in previous research, resilience scores decreased as the level of alcohol intake increased in the officers. "Gratitude scores were highest among African American officers, followed closely by Caucasians, with the lowest scores reported by Hispanic, Native American and Japanese officers. Officers with high and very high life satisfaction reported fewer PTSD symptoms, although given the cross-sectional nature of the study, it is difficult to say whether experiencing PTSD [symptoms](#) results in dissatisfaction with life or vice versa.

The authors conclude that longitudinal research should be conducted to continue the assessment of how protective factors alone and in combination play a role in protecting against or reducing negative conditions that result from exposure to [traumatic events](#).

More information: *Stress and Health*, onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/smi.12615

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