
Hostage Negotiator Stress

By
NANCY K. BOHL, Ph.D.



Barricaded suspects pose special problems for law enforcement personnel, especially when the problem of hostages exists. In the past, the routine response to these situations was to enter the building by using force. However, police departments now often turn to skilled negotiators to end these types of cases through discussion rather than the use of force.

Because negotiators experience high levels of stress, both during and after negotiations, police managers must concern themselves with the long-term, cumulative effects of this stress. This article discusses

how negotiator stress arises and how negotiators can deal successfully with its effects.

SOURCES OF NEGOTIATOR STRESS

External Pressure

Negotiators often experience considerable external pressure to end negotiations. Under ideal conditions, they function in a relatively independent manner, with ample time in which to converse with suspects. They remain free to say whatever seems appropriate and necessary to resolve the incidents peacefully.

In practice, however, constraints exist, and these constraints contribute to the stress felt by negotiators. In some cases, officials order negotiators to make statements to the suspects with which they do not agree. Other times, command personnel interfere in the negotiation process.

For example, in some hostage incidents, both negotiators and SWAT teams respond to the scene. While negotiators hope to bring about a nonviolent resolution to the incident, SWAT teams stand ready to provide force when necessary.

If hours pass without a peaceful resolution of the situation, SWAT

members sometimes grow impatient to move. At this point, officials may pressure negotiators to end discussion with the suspect, even though the negotiators believe that the chance for a successful resolution still exists. When negotiators try to delay the decision to use force, they experience even more tension.

Also, when under pressure to end discussions with suspects, negotiators sometimes begin to believe that SWAT members fail to understand the extent of negotiators' involvement in securing a peaceful end to the incident. With this belief come feelings of anger and hostility—not only toward the suspect but also toward fellow police officers.

Internal Pressure

In addition to the external pressures with which negotiators must deal, internal stress can also exist. The most important source of internal stress felt by negotiators comes

from their intense fear that the incident may not end successfully. To a hostage negotiator, lack of success does not mean only injury or loss of life. Lack of success means that in the end, the police used force.

Therefore, when called to an incident scene, some negotiators feel a sense of denial (“this can’t be happening to me”), or they feel anxious about performing well. They know that lives depend on whether they can defuse a potentially dangerous situation successfully. They must remain calm and in control, even when others behave emotionally, and they must appear relaxed and interested at all times, even while planning what to say next.

All negotiators, no matter how skilled or experienced, feel especially tense during initial contacts with suspects. They face the difficult task of establishing friendly relationships with suspects by convincing them that:

- They benefit from talking to negotiators

- They should not fear for their safety
- Police officers care about what happens to them after the incident ends

In addition, negotiators feel stress when they must reassure hostages in the face of threats from their captors.

Feelings of hostility and anger provide yet another source of internal stress for negotiators during the negotiation process—feelings that become more intense when suspects drink alcohol, use drugs, appear irrational, or act in otherwise unpredictable ways. Negotiators also experience additional stress when incidents involve quiet, passive, or non-English speaking suspects.

RESPONSES TO STRESS

Positive Responses

If negotiations end unsuccessfully, some negotiators begin to feel considerable guilt, anger, and depression, causing further stress in their lives. However, negotiators can relieve this stress in positive ways. For example, they need to accept what happened and recognize that they were not solely responsible for the outcome of the incident. In order to do this, negotiators often rationalize the outcome of unsuccessful incidents—they lay blame with the suspects for failing to negotiate. Although considered unhealthy if used excessively, rationalization is a normal, healthy defense mechanism.

Negotiators can also relieve stress by not dwelling on unsuccessful incidents for days or even weeks after the incidents end. They should,



“
Negotiators who learn to manage stress successfully go back to their jobs with renewed confidence and commitment.
”

Dr. Bohl is a private consultant who works with police departments.

instead, analyze their actions and learn from their mistakes. When they do this, they may decide to use different strategies in future incidents, or they may even decide that they no longer wish to serve as negotiators.

Negative Responses

Long-term stress problems arise when negotiators fail to deal with the feelings of guilt, anger, and depression that follow unsuccessful negotiations. Some negotiators attempt to block out these painful feelings by emotional numbing and distancing. However, maintaining a facade of rigid control and denial results in a high level of irritability. This, in turn, causes undue anger over even minor problems.

If negotiators do not acknowledge these underlying feelings, classic posttraumatic stress symptoms can appear. Examples of these symptoms may include a variety of sleep disturbances, such as an inability to fall asleep, waking up unusually early, cold sweats, toothgrinding, and waking up exhausted after adequate sleep.

These negotiators experience nightmares with a guilt theme. During the day, they may experience intrusive thoughts and flashbacks. They relive the incident over and over again and try, in their minds, to make it end successfully.

Specific stimuli trigger these flashbacks, such as passing the incident scene or hearing a voice that resembles that of a suspect or hostage. If intrusive thoughts continue, negotiators begin to feel that they no longer control their thought processes. This results in high levels of anxiety when they

must return to work. However, methods of relieving this anxiety do exist.

RELIEVING NEGOTIATOR STRESS

Education

Hostage negotiators who receive instruction on what stress they can expect to experience both during and after negotiations deal more successfully with thoughts

“

If negotiations end unsuccessfully, some negotiators begin to feel considerable guilt, anger, and depression....

”

and feelings aroused by the incidents. Education also decreases the likelihood of delayed symptoms of stress.

Negotiators in the California Counties of Riverside and San Bernardino receive 4 hours of training from a psychologist. The topics of instruction include:

- Sources of stress during the negotiation process, such as threats or injury to hostages
- Factors that constitute a stressful incident for a negotiator, such as a death or injury, or the intervention of the SWAT team
- Symptoms of stress that may appear immediately after an incident, such as guilt and anger
- Symptoms that may appear long after the incident, such as

nightmares and intrusive thoughts

- What to do when symptoms of stress appear

The training also focuses on techniques that negotiators can use to reduce stress, both during and after negotiations. They learn to relax muscles, control breathing, and use other techniques to reduce physiological responses to stress, such as sweating, tremors, and

stomach cramps, which sometimes occur during negotiations.

In addition, negotiators learn how to control their cognitive processes. Instructors emphasize that how negotiators perceive certain situations impacts on their physical and behavioral reactions. If negotiators allow themselves to think negative thoughts, panic may ensue; if they maintain a positive mental attitude, they can remain calm.

Instructors also teach negotiators to continue positive self-statements even after the incidents end. Negotiators should reinforce their successes with such internal statements as, “I did it well,” and “Next time, I won’t have to worry as much.”

And, instructors teach negotiators what *not* to do after unsuccessful negotiations. For example, negotiators warn of the dangers

of excessive use of alcohol and having unrealistic expectations for recovery.

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing

Negotiators involved in unsuccessful incidents should see a psychologist for a debriefing session. These sessions are modeled after those used to debrief officers involved in episodes where a death or serious injury occurs. If possible, these sessions, which involve a series of phases, should begin within 24 hours of an incident.

Phase 1—information gathering

Psychologists encourage negotiators to tell their stories to elicit information that can assist in counseling. The counselor might ask a series of questions, such as, "What role did you play in the incident?" "Were you the primary or secondary negotiator?" "When were you called to the scene?" "What were you doing at the time?" "What happened when you arrived at the scene?" "What happened next?" "What did you and the suspect talk about?" "How long did the episode last?" and "How did the episode end?"

Phase 2—negotiator thoughts

Negotiators describe their thoughts during this phase of the counseling session. At this point, counselors ask questions that focus on the negotiators' use of positive and negative self-statements during the incident.

Phase 3—negotiator feelings

At this time, counselors encourage negotiators to describe any feel-

ings they experienced during the incident. Negotiators need to acknowledge feelings of fear, anger, hostility, and inadequacy so that the counselors can help them deal appropriately with these emotions.

“**A stress management program benefits not only the negotiators but also the departments they represent.**”

Phase 4—physical symptoms of stress

During this part of the counseling sessions, counselors ask negotiators to describe any physical symptoms of stress they experienced during the incident. These symptoms may include sweating, palpitations, flushing, and breathlessness.

Phase 5—unfinished business

Negotiators bring their past experiences to current incidents. For this reason, counselors specifically ask them whether the most recent incident brought to mind any previous incidents. The suspect's words and behavior may have aroused strong feelings associated with earlier events, or the negotiators may have experienced previous episodes with similar features. Also, if any previous episodes ended unsuccessfully, negotiators may link the two episodes together. They need to acknowledge these feelings and

make a clear distinction between "then" and "now."

Phase 6—teaching

Negotiators who experience problems after incidents need to understand that these feelings and symptoms are normal. Counselors reassure them that any healthy, well-adjusted person would have similar feelings during crisis incidents. They also warn them of possible delayed reactions, such as nightmares, and how to handle these delayed stress symptoms. Counselors discuss the positive effects of meditation, exercise, and recreation, as well as the negative effects of such potentially damaging props as alcohol.

Phase 7—summary

During the summary portion of the session, counselors answer any questions and provide information on how negotiators can obtain further help, if necessary. This could come in the form of continued professional help or from the support of other hostage negotiators. Often, the debriefing session leads to followup sessions.

CONCLUSION

A stress management program benefits not only the negotiators but also the departments they represent. Negotiators who learn to manage stress successfully go back to their jobs with renewed confidence and commitment. Police departments that institute stress management programs reap the benefits of negotiators who can handle crisis incidents in a healthy, professional manner. ♦