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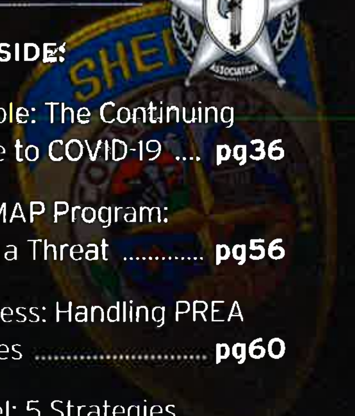

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CALM BEYOND THE STORM

Crisis negotiators must manage multiple sources of stress to be effective in their roles

By Nancy K. Bohl-Penrod, Ph.D.

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to train with the FBI at its academy in Quantico, Virginia, after my client agencies asked if I would be a part of their crisis negotiation teams (CNTs). I attended a basic two-week course and an advanced one-week course, learning about hostage negotiators and their role in responding to barricaded subjects, suicidal subjects, and hostage-takers. The intent was for me to be part of a CNT that would go on calls with the SWAT team.

For years, I rolled out with the CNT and helped negotiators with some of the decisions they had to make in trying to talk down suspects. I tried never to be a primary negotiator, preferring to advise and consult in a secondary role. Of course, the best-laid plans often go astray, and there were times I negotiated on the phone and face-to-face. No matter what role you play on the CNT or SWAT team, however, these situations take their toll.

To succeed as a negotiator, an individual must be the kind of person who can maintain a balance between opposites. On one hand, it is important to be able to establish an emotional distance from the situation—to exist in a state of what some negotiators call "detached concern"—or risk losing control of the situation. On the other hand, an individual needs to be sufficiently open and involved in the conversation to establish a trusting relationship with a hostage-taker who is likely upset and irrational when they make contact.

FBI training includes many days of role-playing, and if the role-playing isn't successful, it creates turmoil among class participants. But after experiencing numerous real-life calls, I found that CNT members—and especially hostage negotiators—deal with considerable amounts of stress. Although they are chosen specifically for their ability to tolerate stress over long periods of time, they are by no means immune to the cumulative effect of entering situations that elicit extreme anxiety and tension.

Anxiety en route

The stress begins before the CNT member arrives at the scene. Negotiators can be called upon at any time, no matter what they're doing. Most begin thinking about what to do and say when they begin to deal with a hostage-taker or barricaded subject well ahead of their arrival at the scene.

A particularly tense moment for any negotiator is the initial contact with the suspect. The negotiator assumes most of the responsibility for ensuring the safety of the hostage at this moment; he or she then needs to begin creating a relationship with the hostage-taker. This effort may determine whether or not the situation is resolved without the use of force. The negotiator must convince the suspect—who's often emotional and upset—that the police are not

going to kill him or her. The negotiator must be persuasive and reassure the suspect that safety upon surrender is guaranteed. This is an intense task.

After the negotiator makes contact with the suspect, there's no guarantee that the suspect will continue to engage in conversation. A major source of stress, frustration, and anxiety is to have the suspect hang up on the negotiator. A situation can also produce anxiety if the suspect wants to carry on a conversation through an intermediary. This is not optimal, since communication may be distorted in translation, but if it's the only way to have a conversation, that's what the negotiator must do.

The stress of the situation increases if the suspect is irrational and unpredictable. Negotiation is founded in the belief that talking over problems with the suspect will defuse his or her negative emotions, and if that doesn't happen, the negotiator may feel they've lost control of the situation. If the suspect is inebriated, communication difficulties are likely to worsen.

Face-to-face negotiation

Although dealing with a subject on the phone carries a great deal of stress, it is not as difficult as a face-to-face interaction. Face-to-face interactions put the negotiator and the suspect in a situation where either or both could be injured. Face-to-face interaction may help establish a stronger relationship, but if the negotiation is not concluded successfully without the use of force, it can create a stronger sense of loss in the negotiator.

The negotiator faces additional stress when problems arise in dealing with command personnel and members of the SWAT team. To some degree, the negotiator's goals and the tactical team's goals are at odds: The negotiator's goal is to bring about a peaceful resolution, while the tactical team is trained to act rather than talk.

The command staff and the SWAT team might feel that talking represents inaction, and the longer the situation goes on, the more dangerous it might become. This scenario can cause the negotiator to feel more pressure to bring about a resolution more quickly than might be ideal. Hurrying a negotiation is not always an easy task, and as time goes on, the pressure to end the negotiation increases.

If negotiations are successful and the hostage-taker gets ready to give himself or herself up, the negotiator is at the crux of a peaceful surrender. Something can still go wrong, and the safety of the suspect and hostages is at risk.

If the negotiation is resolved by the SWAT team's use of force, the crisis negotiator may feel like a failure. And when a barricaded subject ends the situation by committing suicide after hours of negotiation, the negotiator may feel distress after getting to know the suspect.

After the incident

When a LEO is involved in a shooting, they typically take some time off and get debriefed before they returning to work. The debriefing is usually facilitated by a mental health professional one-on-one, or the department may hold a group debriefing with a mental health professional assisted by a peer supporter and/or chaplain.

Command staff need to consider doing the same for CNT members. If a negotiator is involved in an unsuccessful incident, they should be given the same time off as a member of the SWAT team and be furnished with post-trauma counseling by a mental health professional. Counseling should continue until the negotiator feels ready to rejoin the CNT. If the debriefing is performed in a group setting, I suggest that the negotiators be invited and have the opportunity to verbalize their stress reactions. Just don't forget the negotiators during follow-up support.

In my experience, crisis negotiators will talk about many reactions they've had on calls. One of the most common reactions is anger—especially if the suspect refuses to talk or won't respond to reasonable requests. Another common reaction is the fear of anyone being injured, and if the situation is not resolved successfully, negotiators can experience feelings of blame and guilt. Feeling responsible for the outcome of an incident is common.

Since most negotiations involve the use of audio and video recordings, the negotiator has an opportunity to review what was said. Listening and watching the recordings can be beneficial if negotiators can learn from their mistakes and avoid another opportunity for self-blame.

Without an incident debriefing after an unsuccessful negotiation, long-term stress responses are likely to kick in—insomnia, nightmares, intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, and other problems. The stress response may lead to anxiety, because the negotiator feels a loss of control over her or his thoughts. Mentally replaying the end of the event is common, and although one might think that a replay would involve imagining a more satisfactory ending, many negotiators report that when they replay the incident's end, they make it even worse than what happened. Withdrawal is another possible response; the negotiator may decide that it is simply too painful to talk to anyone about the incident.

There's a real need to deal with the emotions negotiators feel. During any incident, they can't express the anger they experience toward the suspect, the command staff, and the SWAT team openly. If the negotiator fails to acknowledge these negative feelings, they can be internalized and left unresolved. They may be expressed in inappropriate ways at work and at home.

Everyone involved in such an incident should attend a group debriefing. This should be carried out in an environment where they feel safe and comfortable. The ideal arrangement is for members of the SWAT team to be present at the debriefing alongside negotiators, but if the negotiators and the SWAT team members are at odds because of their roles in the incident's outcome, debrief them separately.

Negotiators experience considerable stress before, during, and after a negotiation, and from multiple sources. Providing a critical incident stress management program (CISM) can benefit not only the negotiators, but also the agencies they represent. Negotiators who learn to manage stress successfully will go back to their jobs with renewed confidence and commitment. And sheriff's offices that institute such programs will help negotiators handle crisis incidents in a healthy, professional manner.

Nancy K. Bohl-Penrod, Ph.D., is staff director of The Counseling Team International (TCTI).