

CANADIAN WOMEN'S WELLNESS INITIATIVE: PROTECTING OUR POLICE

By Helen Foster-Grimmett

National Director for Police Outreach

Canadian Women's Wellness Initiative

The Canadian Women's Wellness Initiative serves individuals whose jobs, health, and lives are at risk due to high levels of stress. Recently CWWI partnered with the Central Saanich Police Service near Victoria, British Columbia, to offer training in the Transcendental Meditation® technique to their police officers and civilian staff. The program, with benefits including a significant reduction of stress and its symptoms, is bearing results as documented in a before and after evaluation using the Cohen Perceived Stress Scale.

STRESS IS PROFOUNDLY DAMAGING



**KATHLEEN THOMSON,
CONSTABLE [RETIRED], SAANICH
POLICE Service**

Each sitting of meditation is like having a restorative vacation. I have sustained, fresh energy. I feel far more settled, and little things that used to bother me, don't as much anymore. I'm more present, and more easily able to listen to and engage with others without my mind wandering. Each sitting of meditation leaves me feeling both incredibly relaxed and energized at the same time. I wish I'd discovered TM years ago.

It is well established that chronic and debilitating stress has a damaging effect on physiology, mind, and emotions. Stress is often associated with increased cortisol, known as the "stress hormone", which in chronic cases can lead to both high blood pressure and high blood sugar. Toxic stress may lead to physical, mental, and emotional ills, including exhaustion, insomnia, depression, substance misuse, heart disease, and social problems. In fact, almost all disease is either caused or aggravated by stress.

THE EFFECTS OF STRESS ON POLICE

Being a police officer can elevate a ones' stress level exponentially. Working 12-hour days or nights can lead to symptoms of Shift Work Sleep Disorder [SWSD]: insomnia, feeling sleepy when needing to be alert, concentration problems, lack of energy, irritability, and depression. These symptoms can adversely affect both the officer's professional and personal life.

Officers on patrol are necessarily on high alert during their shift, often leading to chronically elevated adrenaline and cortisol levels and hyperarousal, a state similar to what is experienced by active-duty military personnel. Prolonged high levels of these two stress hormones increase the risk of heart disease, heart attack and stroke. Research published in the April 2010 issue of *Journal of Clinical Investigation* reported that high levels of these stress hormones also make it easier for cancer to spread.

In their fieldwork, police officers often must intervene in highly volatile domestic violence incidents, deal with fatal car accidents, arrest drug dealers, search for abducted children while helping distraught parents, or be mentally prepared to testify at court hearings. From repeated exposure to critical incidents, extended levels of stress can take a toll, even precipitating suicidal thoughts or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD]. To counteract these effects, many police departments now have Critical Incident Peer-to-Peer Teams.

In a 2015 research study with over 700 police officers in a British Columbia police department, one in three officers had clinically verifiable Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder—about 30% of the entire police department. Symptoms included many of the following: moderate to severe anxiety, cynicism, constant worry, insomnia, irritability, agitation, misuse of alcohol and drugs, damaged relationships and even thoughts of suicide.

Les Sylven, Police Chief of the Central Saanich Police Service at the time of the Transcendental Meditation training, supported the use of meditation, seeing it as one more tool that officers could utilize in managing toxic stress:



“Central Saanich Police Service has been very fortunate to have some of staff trained in TM. This training has included not only police officers, but also valuable civilian employees who support them. They are often the first to interact with the public when they need help. Sometimes a group of us meditate together at the end of the day. This is particularly rewarding for me as I know how important it is that we go home to our loved ones and families feeling calm, present, and at our best.”

PROTECTING POLICE FROM TOXIC STRESS

There are three approaches through which relief from toxic stress can be easily provided:

1. Increasing resilience, so stressful situations have less power to create damage.

2. Developing greater fitness for duty, including improvements in intelligence, faster reaction time, focus comprehension, energy, mental coherence, quicker recovery from stress, and mind-body coordination.
3. Improvements in intelligence, faster reaction time, focus comprehension, energy, mental coherence, quicker recovery from stress, and mind-body coordination.

Transcendental Meditation delivers the benefits of all three approaches in one stroke; these and other benefits have been rigorously documented in more than 400 peer-reviewed research studies.

The technique is effortless and easily learned. It involves no religion, no set of beliefs or change in lifestyle, and it can be practised sitting comfortably anywhere. The TM technique can be easily integrated into the wellness program for women in high stress professions such as policing.

Hopefully many more police departments will look into offering this wellness program for their officers. Our police officers have chosen to serve and be responsible for the welfare of society and they put their lives on the line for us every day. It is society's duty, in turn, to give them every highly effective tool available to protect them in their work.