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Emotional Intelligence: Practical Advice for Law Enforcement Officers

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People are not disturbed by things, but by the views which they take of them." So wrote Epictetus, an ancient Greek philosopher, who believed that the best way for people to manage their emotions is to control their thoughts.

One characteristic of effective officers is the ability to recognize and manage their emotions. In fact, studies have demonstrated that individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence (EI), relative to others, are better able to perceive and manage their emotions, have more positive social interactions, and engage in fewer problem behaviors, including aggressive and violent acts. Additionally, EI appears to contribute to an increased recognition and respect for the feelings of others, improved cooperation, and better teamwork.¹ It appears that officers who are able to increase their EI have a distinct advantage, both personally and professionally, in a number of important areas, including self-

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control, decision making, and interpersonal skills.

For purposes of this article, EI is defined as the ability to recognize and manage one's emotions, as well as those of others. (For a lengthier description of EI research and theory, see the previous article, [on pages 94–102.](#)) Despite considerable focus on the concept over the past decade, very little has been written about the practical aspects of EI, particularly as it pertains to the law enforcement profession. The purpose of this article is to provide law enforcement professionals with a working understanding of one important area of EI: how to recognize and manage one's emotions, particularly anger.

Importance of Emotions

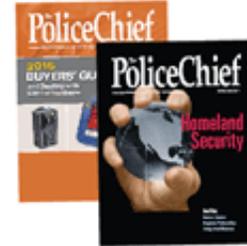
Whether humans realize it or not, emotions play an important role in virtually everything we do. Emotions help us think and learn, motivate us toward important goals, allow us to bond with others, direct us in making difficult choices, and protect us from danger. But while emotions serve a number of important functions, they can also present a host of behavioral and health-related problems if not managed correctly.

In simplest terms, emotions represent complex internal feeling states with cognitive, physical, and behavioral components.² Cognitively, people experience a shift in focus as their attention becomes fixed on a person or object and how best to cope with it. Physically, numerous bodily changes are perceived, including elevated vital signs (heart rate, blood pressure, and temperature), dilated pupils, and muscular tension. Behaviorally, humans experience feelings and emotions as an impulse to act—to move away from, or toward, a person or object.

While all emotions share the same components, this model does not

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present a complete picture. Emotions do not occur in a vacuum. In other words, emotions have specific causes; for example, a person is angry *with* someone or something. In fact, it is the all-consuming focus of emotions that can make them so difficult to ignore. This seems especially true for anger, which can range in intensity from mild irritation to full-blown rage. Because anger is unpleasant and produces high levels of arousal, it makes the person feeling it want to do something and to do it quickly. Unfortunately, when people are angry, their decisions and actions often create more problems than they solve.

ABCs of Emotions

Psychologists have come to believe that all people create their own unique experiences based on the ways they perceive, interpret, and remember information. Accordingly, emotional reactions are not caused by the objective facts of a situation but by the ways people appraise and assign meaning to other people and to things.³ Individual differences in beliefs and what is called self-talk are considered one of the primary reasons that people can vary widely in their response to the same situation. As a result, understanding the roles played by beliefs and self-talk represents a critical step in recognizing and managing emotional responses.

Albert Ellis, the founder of rational emotive therapy, offers a three-step model to explain the role of beliefs and self-talk statements in influencing emotional reactions, referred to as the ABCs of emotions:

- **Activating events** are the people, things, or other assumed stressors in an officer's life. It could be a motorist who refuses to sign a citation, a citizen who "pays your salary," or a supervisor who wants things done a certain way. The

person or event prevents the officer from meeting a goal, which can lead to frustration and, ultimately, anger if not managed properly.

- **Beliefs and self-talk** are statements that officers tell themselves about the activating events in their lives. The first type of beliefs and self-talk are rational, adaptive, and supportive. They help cope with frustration, find workable solutions, and soothe negative emotions. In contrast, the second type of beliefs and self-talk are irrational, maladaptive, and hurtful. Predictably, the latter type often leads to frustration, anxiety, and poor decision making.
- **Consequences** are what result from an officer's beliefs and self-talk statements. Depending on the statements involved, emotional consequences can include anger and depression or more positive responses, such as satisfaction or happiness.⁴

While it is common to hear officers—or anyone else for that matter—make statements like “that idiot really ticked me off,” this type of thinking (A caused C) is not very accurate. In fact, it is not the motorist, or “idiot,” who cause officers emotional distress; rather, it is their beliefs and self-talk statements.⁵ Fortunately, it is possible to influence the trajectory of emotions profoundly by challenging irrational beliefs and negative self-talk.

Role of Self-Talk

Self-talk is the ongoing, continuous dialogue that all people have with themselves. It is the raw material used to manufacture appraisals of other people and things. The ways that people talk to themselves

determine to a large degree their feelings, emotions, and behaviors. Not surprisingly, people develop many of their self-talk statements early in life, often during childhood. These same beliefs and statements can persist for years, going essentially unnoticed and unchallenged. It is important to recognize, however, that with every use, people further reinforce these beliefs—eventually allowing them to become part of the automatic, subconscious ways they think about the world.

Some beliefs represent healthy, rational ways of thinking about the world. Such beliefs are instrumental in helping people achieve many of their goals. However, other beliefs are neither healthy nor well-adapted. It is these unhealthy, irrational beliefs that cause many negative emotions as well as stress and anxiety. In many cases where undesirable emotion exists, it can be traced to a person's unrealistic or irrational beliefs. While it is possible to have a momentary outburst of emotion without conscious thought, people sustain those feelings—particularly negative ones—through self-talk.⁶

The fact that most people are unaware of their self-talk is one of the main reasons that negative patterns are able to develop and take root. To develop healthy, well-adapted patterns of self-talk, it is vital to identify and challenge irrational or unhealthy beliefs before they become subconscious patterns. Next, these irrational beliefs must be replaced with healthy, realistic statements.

Five Common Irrational Beliefs

All people have numerous beliefs about others, the world, and themselves.⁷ Some of these beliefs are rational and appropriate, whereas others are irrational and inappropriate. As previously discussed, negative emotional reactions are created by repeating and reinforcing irrational beliefs. Five of the most common irrational

beliefs and how to challenge them follow.

Should/Must Thinking: The first type of irrational belief, should/must thinking, occurs when officers place demands on others, the world, or themselves. This type of thinking is usually associated with words like “never,” “always,” and “have to.” Should/must thinking is an outgrowth of the natural tendency to escalate one’s wishes and preferences to demands. Officers can become emotionally upset, for example, when people do not comply with their strict demands to change a particular behavior. Absent obvious officer safety concerns, the key to challenging such irrational beliefs is realizing that many such “rules” are based on preference and choice, not categorical imperatives. Although everyone has a fondness for certain behaviors, there are very few absolutes.

All-or-Nothing Thinking: Officers engaged in all-or-nothing thinking evaluate people and things in absolute terms. In other words, things are either good or bad, positive or negative, right or wrong. There is simply nothing in between, no middle ground, and no gray area. Similar to should/must thinking, all-or-nothing beliefs are based on rigid, unrealistic rules, despite the fact that very few things are completely “good” or “bad.” The key to changing such thinking is to challenge the absolute rules that form the foundations of these beliefs. Is it realistic to believe that everyone, everywhere, at every time will treat officers with the utmost respect? Or might there be times when an officer will have to work with difficult people? The question then becomes which belief is more realistic? Considering the nature of police work, the latter response seems more reasonable.

Awfulizing or Maximizing: Awfulizing or maximizing, also referred to as catastrophic thinking, occurs when officers exaggerate a minor problem so that it becomes a serious one. It is associated with

phrases like “I can’t stand it,” “this is terrible,” or “why is this happening to me?” The best way to challenge this form of thinking is to realize that very few things in life are truly “awful” or “horrible,” but merely inconvenient. Whenever officers discover themselves using such language, they should immediately replace it with more reasonable, emotionally cool words, such as “inconvenient” or “unpleasant.” Because language has such a profound impact on the ways people respond, it is important for officers to choose their words carefully.

Labeling: Human beings are not neutral observers, simply going about their lives as dispassionate, unbiased spectators—they have strong feelings and opinions about almost everything and everyone with whom they come in contact.⁸ Many of the labels used to describe others or things were learned during early childhood and, like other irrational beliefs, developed into unconscious, automatic habits. Similar to other forms of self-talk, labels can have a powerful influence on the trajectory of an individual’s response. The trick to correcting negative labels is to ask whether or not such terms are truly accurate. If not, officers should change their labels or, better yet, eliminate them altogether.

“Why” Questions: The final irrational belief discussed in this article is actually a disguised form of should/must thinking. It occurs when an officer repeats the same question over and over, usually beginning with *why* or *how could*. The questions focus on “why is this happening?” or “how could this occur?” Because these questions are based on should/must thinking, the officer is convinced that the event should never have happened and, therefore, cannot accept it. Simply answering the question is one of the best ways to challenge “why” thinking. This allows an officer to look at the question logically, acknowledge the reality of the situation, and take appropriate action.

Seven Steps to Improving Emotional Intelligence

Once officers develop a better understanding of emotions, as well as the roles played by irrational beliefs, labels, and self-talk, there are specific steps that officers can take to recognize and manage their reactions better.⁹ The following seven steps should be helpful.

Appraisal: Improving one's EI begins with a better understanding of the appraisal process, that is, the ways we appraise—or assign meaning to—people and things. Because all emotions start with essentially the same state of general arousal, the specific emotion officers experience has more to do with the way they evaluate things than the objective circumstances. In fact, people vary in their reactions to the same event mostly because they differ in their beliefs and self-talk.

Self-Talk: Once officers recognize the importance of appraisal, they need to identify and challenge their irrational beliefs and labels. To do so requires paying greater attention to the automatic patterns of internal dialogue they developed during childhood. Whereas some of these patterns are well-suited to helping officers achieve their goals and manage their emotions, others are not. Only by identifying their irrational beliefs and labels can officers begin to replace these statements with more adaptive, rational patterns.

Hot Buttons: Everyone has “hot buttons”—people, events, and things that tend to upset us. Officers who recognize their triggers ahead of time have the opportunity to prepare themselves mentally and emotionally for such events. In many cases, it can help to visualize a situation or a person before an event takes place; practice how best to respond; and consider the specific beliefs, labels, and self-talk statements that are used. In the same way that officers rehearse mentally for tactical

situations, they can prepare for emotionally charged encounters. Taking the time to practice one's emotional responses and self-talk is one way of increasing the odds that an officer will respond in rational, adaptive ways.

Emotional Literacy: Rather than use the term *anger* to describe every negative emotional experience, officers can benefit by learning to identify their emotions more accurately. By taking the time to examine their emotions, officers can name their responses correctly. Anger, for example, comes in many forms: displeasure, annoyance, upset, irritation, or agitation. Because words are powerful, officers should be careful with the words they choose to identify their responses.

Physical and Mental Cues: Another helpful technique that officers can use to manage their emotions is learning to identify the physical and mental cues associated with anger and other negative reactions. Because strong emotions produce noticeable bodily sensations and shifts in thinking, the better officers can recognize these changes, the better they will be at managing their reactions. Once officers have identified the bodily changes that accompany strong emotions, they will be better able to identify when they are becoming angry.

Practical or Emotional Problems? Every circumstance consists of two types of problems: one practical, the other emotional. The practical problem is the actual person, event, or thing requiring an officer's attention. In contrast, the emotional problem is the way the officer feels about the practical problem, whether it be frustration, irritation, or annoyance. When officers are overly upset or emotional, they are often unable to make clear decisions or take the kind of action necessary to alleviate the practical problem. Rather than working toward a realistic solution, the emotional reaction is now the problem. Improving one's EI makes

it possible to separate practical and emotional problems, control reactions, and find workable solutions.

More Time for Decisions: Lastly, it is critical to acknowledge the harmful effects of emotions on decision making and other cognitive processes. Strong emotions can drain officers' mental, physical, and psychological energies, increasing the likelihood of poor decisions and inappropriate behavior. Because it often takes time for officers to regain their full decision-making abilities after experiencing strong emotions, the best way to counter these effects is to increase the time allotted for important decisions. In many cases, simply taking a "time-out" or discussing the best course of action with someone else can prevent many of the problems and poor choices that so often accompany anger.

Summary

There is no denying the important role that emotions play in officers' daily lives. However, a failure to recognize and manage reactions can have serious consequences for officers, their agencies, and their communities. Although it might be easier for officers to blame their anger on someone else, all people can control and are accountable for their emotional reactions. In the end, officers are responsible for improving their EI by taking control of their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Regardless of how awful a situation might appear, officers still have control over how they choose to respond. Ultimately, they must accept responsibility for their choices.

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Notes:

¹For a more complete discussion of the findings and implications of emotional intelligence, see John D. Mayer, Peter Salovey, and David R. Caruso, "Emotional Intelligence: Theory, Findings, and Implications," *Psychological Inquiry* 15, no. 3 (2004): 197–215.

²See, for example, Randolph M. Nesse, "Evolutionary Explanations of Emotions," *Human Nature* 1, no. 3 (1990): 261–289.

³See, for example, Richard S. Lazarus, *Emotion and Adaptation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁴For a detailed discussion of Ellis's model, see Albert Ellis and Arthur Lange, *How to Keep People from Pushing Your Buttons* (New York: Citadel Press, 1995).

⁵See, for example, Lynn Clark, *SOS Help for Emotions: Managing Anxiety, Anger, and Depression* (Bowling Green, Kentucky: Parents Press, 1998).

⁶See Albert Ellis, "Toward a Theory of Personality," in *Reading in Current Personality Theories*, ed. Raymond J. Corsini (Itasca, Illinois: Peacock, 1978).

⁷For a more complete discussion, see Reneau Peurifoy, *Anger: Taming the Beast* (New York: Kodansha International, 1999).

⁸For a discussion of labels and self-talk, see Phillip C. McGraw, *Self-Matters: Creating Your Life From the Inside Out* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

⁹For a thorough discussion of labels and beliefs, see Albert Ellis and Robert A. Harper, *A Guide to Rational Living*, 3d ed. (Hollywood, California: Wilshire, 1997).

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