

A TRIAD APPROACH TO ENHANCING CAREER LONGEVITY

BY KRIS MIENERT

Recent negative changes to several state law enforcement pension plans have led many law enforcement officers to work more years in their profession, creating new challenges to an aging law enforcement population. The good news is that officers can improve their longevity by making simple modifications to their daily lives.

OUR AGING BODY

The human body goes through many changes during its life cycle, including the loss of muscle mass as we age. Although several factors account for the rate of muscle loss, data suggests that beginning at age 30, most individuals lose about 1 percent, or about a third of a pound of muscle, every year if no preventative measures are taken.¹ Since muscle cells burn more calories at rest

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than fat cells, the loss of muscle also results in more weight gain. While one cannot halt the aging process, a balanced diet with adequate protein and strength training are active steps to take to combat muscle mass and strength losses.

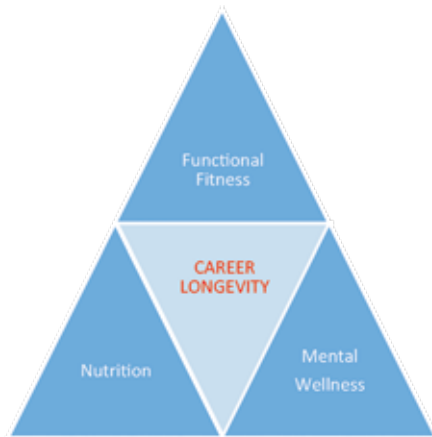
Flexibility also decreases with age. Connective tissue tends to become harder during the aging process. It is important to continue to practice active stretching, especially for those muscle groups of the lower back, hamstrings

and hip flexors, which tend to tighten up after several hours of sitting in a squad car. Engaging in programs that involve stretching exercises will help maintain good range of motion and joint function.

A TRIAD APPROACH

The triangle is one of the strongest architectural elements, providing strength and stability. One can apply the “triangle” concept to many situations. For instance, the three sides of a firefighting triangle include oxygen, heat and fuel. All three of these elements need to be present for there to be fire. The same can be said of encountering a suspect in a possible use-of-force situation, with “means, proximity and intent” as the three sides of the triangle. Remove one of

these elements, and the dynamics of the situation drastically change. The same triangle concept can be applied here, with functional fitness, nutrition and mental health being the necessary elements. It is a simplistic yet strong illustration of how career longevity can be accomplished. (Figure 1)



FUNCTIONAL FITNESS

Functional fitness is common terminology in today's fitness world. But what does it really mean? Merriam-Webster defines "functional" as "designed to have a practical use." Apply this concept to the essential functions of the job of a law enforcement officer relative to a fitness program, and one has a functional fitness program.

High-intensity circuit training (HICT), or high-intensity interval training (HIIT), is an exercise program designed to vary workout routines, which shocks the body out of its physical complacency and in turn, burns more calories, boosts metabolic rates and enhances performance.

With shift work, a main factor to any fitness program is to find what works best for an officer's schedule. Set aside a small space in the garage or home dedicated to fitness. Fitness apps have exploded onto the market. Several popular workout apps on the market offer the 7-Minute Workout Challenge,

a research-backed, seven-minute HICT workout that can be done anywhere.²

High costs of a gym membership should no longer be an excuse. Most clubs have trial offers in which a person can test out the gym before investing in a long-term health club membership.

Numerous HICT programs, such as Tabatas, Crossfit, progressive calisthenics and plyometric training have been gaining in popularity. Whatever program is selected, keep in mind how it correlates to explosive functional abilities and if it will sustain a high level of fitness. In addition, it is essential to seek out safe, professional exercise instruction. Qualified personal trainers will, at minimum, hold at least one NCCA-accredited personal trainer certification. Experienced fitness instructors ensure that employees safely and progressively increase fitness levels without incurring preventable injuries, and will also increase sustained motivation and adherence to an exercise program.

Be smart about your fitness regime. Pain has a purpose. Listen to the body, and modify routines or rest as necessary. Also, consult with a physician before starting any exercise and/or nutritional program.

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NUTRITION

Food consumed should promote a healthy psychological and hormonal response, support healthy digestive and immune systems and minimize inflammation.³

Food can be divided into two major classifications: micronutrients, as in

vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients; and macronutrients, such as carbohydrates, protein and fat.

Macronutrients most likely come to mind when thinking about nutrition. In simplistic terms, carbohydrates are used for fuel, with four calories per gram. Proteins, also with four calories per gram, are required for building and repairing the body. Fats, with nine calories per gram, provide several functions. They allow the absorption of vitamins and essential nutrients, help maintain proper immune function, support brain tissue and hormonal regulation and are a slow-burning energy source.

Another triangle concept within the typical food pyramid is salt, sugars and fat. Although most information focuses on excess amounts, insufficient amounts can be just as detrimental. Numerous studies discuss excess amounts, which can negatively impact several health conditions.

Salt: According to the American Heart Association, high blood pressure is a leading cause of heart disease. The average American consumes about 3,400 milligrams of sodium (salt) per day, more than double the 1,500 milligrams recommended by the association. Since excess sodium boosts blood pressure, a reduction of sodium in the diet is an easy step in potentially preventing heart disease.

Sugars: Natural sugars are found in foods such as fruit (fructose) and milk (lactose). Added sugars include any sugars or caloric sweeteners that are included in foods or beverages during processing or preparation. Unfortunately, it is sometimes difficult to identify sugars while looking at the food label, as added sugars are disguised under a myriad of titles, including dextrose, maltose, sucrose and high fructose corn syrup. Knowing how to read a nutrition label is more important than ever to understanding what is being consumed.

Too much sugar is not a good thing. Foods high in sugar can increase inflammation. Chronically elevated blood sugars and insulin levels are contributing factors to type-2 diabetes and a number of other lifestyle-related diseases and conditions.⁴ The American Heart Association recommends limiting the amount of added sugars consumed to no more than half of one's daily discretionary caloric intake.

And what about those artificial sweeteners? Several studies show that natural sugar and artificial sweeteners affect the brain in different ways. Some reports say artificial sweeteners are anywhere from 200 to 700 times sweeter than table sugar. Another concern about artificial sweeteners is that they affect the body's ability to gauge how many calories are being consumed.

Fats: There are four major dietary fats in the foods we eat: saturated fats, trans fats, monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated fats. The four types have different chemical structures and physical properties. The bad fats, saturated and trans fats, tend to be more solid at room temperature (a stick of butter), while monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats tend to be more liquid (liquid vegetable oil).

All fats are not bad. The human body requires some form of fats that it cannot produce itself, such as omega-6 and omega-3 fatty acids. The American Heart Association Nutrition Committee recommends eating between 25 percent and 35 percent of a person's total daily calories as fats from foods like fish, nuts and vegetable oils. Limit the amount of saturated fats to less than 7 percent of total daily calories.

DON'T FORGET ABOUT WATER

Keeping the body hydrated helps the heart more easily pump blood through the blood vessels to the muscles and helps the muscles work efficiently.

Think of food itself as fuel. Just as putting a high-grade gasoline into an automobile provides peak performance, food does the same thing in the human body.

Water also contributes to the maintenance of normal thermoregulation, as well as physical and cognitive functions. This is why it is imperative to keep well-hydrated, especially during prolonged events such as a SWAT incident.

As discussed earlier, the body loses muscle with age. Building muscle mass is a direct correlation with nutrition. So how does one put all the nutritional concepts together when it all seems so complicated? Eating a balanced diet, with food as close to the source as possible, is a great start. Shop on the outside edges of a grocery store, where the fresh, non-processed foods are located. Read and understand food labels. Plan out meals and snacks. Use fitness apps that provide nutritional information and track calories as well as the percentage of fats, carbohydrates and protein. Think of food itself as fuel. Just as putting a high-grade gasoline into an automobile provides peak performance, food does the same thing in the human body. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) Health Watch initiative "Eating Well On-the-Go" reference sheet is a great guide for providing education and support to improve officer nutrition. Most importantly, find a nutritional plan that works best for you.

MENTAL WELLNESS

The dynamics of law enforcement are ever-changing. And with increased

scrutiny by the public, officers need to ensure they are taking care of themselves not only physically, but mentally as well. Most of us are familiar with Critical Incident Stress Debriefings (CISD), which are a great first step for allowing officers to work through a critical situation. But then what? Oftentimes, that is where the official offers of help ends. Fortunately, with changing cultures and more awareness of mental wellness, the stigma of getting help is decreasing.

The May 2015 report "The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing," identifies officer wellness and safety as one of six pillars. The report states that "a large proportion of officer injuries and deaths are not the result of interaction with criminal offenders but the outcome of poor physical health due to poor nutrition, lack of exercise, sleep deprivation and substance abuse."⁵

The task force supported several action items, including tailored treatments for mental health issues unique to officers; continued research of an annual mental health check for officers, as well as fitness, resilience and nutrition; and the promotion of safety and wellness within law enforcement agencies. Police administrators have a duty to identify and implement action

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items for their own agencies in line with the task force's recommendations.

There are many avenues to follow for individual officers to seek help, whether it is counseling sessions, employee assistance programs (EAP) or other resources offered through their medical provider. Let's not forget families of officers, either. Seek out resources that will benefit the officers and their support groups. One of the more renowned experts in this field is Kevin Gilmartin. His book and seminar entitled "Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement"⁶ focuses on aiding officers and their families in improving their quality of life, both personally and professionally. As a retired deputy sheriff turned psychologist, Gilmartin provides a unique perspective as well as action plans for officers and their families.

Speaking from experience, I know "yoga" is a four-letter word that most SWAT officers will cringe at the thought of even considering. However, yoga, which means "to yoke or join the mind, spirit and the body," provides techniques that accomplish several concepts of this article. The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) supports the integration of yoga into the exercise regimens of healthy individuals as long as properly trained professionals deliver instruction. The ACSM cites yoga's promotion of "profound mental, physical and spiritual awareness" and its benefits as a form of stretching and as an enhancer of breath control and of core strength.⁷

CONCLUSION

Establishing good, healthy lifestyle habits early in one's profession is essential to a long and safe career. Just as professional athletes have their prime age, so do law enforcement

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officers. Yet the pension system is changing the game. Officers have the ability to stay in the game longer by taking charge of their career longevity triangle. ■

ENDNOTES

1. "Stopping Age-Related Muscle Loss." *The Boston Globe*, March 5, 2012.
2. "High Intensity Circuit Training Using Body Weight: Maximum Results with Minimal Investment." *American College of Sports Medicine: Health and Fitness Journal*, June 2013, Volume 17, Issue 3.
3. Hartwig, Dallas and Melissa. *It Starts With Food*. Las Vegas, Nevada: Victory Belt Publishing, Inc., 2012.
4. Ibid.
5. "President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing." Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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RESOURCES

American Heart Association, www.heart.org

American Heart Association Heart Insight Magazine, heartinsight.heart.org

The IACP Health Watch initiative "Eating Well On-the-Go" reference sheet www.theiacp.org/Portals/0/documents/pdfs/ROI/IACP-FactSheet-HW-FINAL_Web.pdf