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Stress in uniformed services: Introduction

The term *stress* has become very popular in recent years. Although widely used, it is still ambiguous. It is applied when referring to uncommon, traumatic events, but also with regard to everyday life situations and related experiences. The concept of stress is derived from the works of physiologist Walter Cannon and endocrinologist Hans Selye and concerns primarily biological stress considered in terms of reactions to present stimuli. Any symptoms of maladjustment or lack of adaptation are treated as indicators of stress. Cannon used the term *stress* to describe the ‘fight or flight’ response triggered to restore the disturbed balance of the body as a result of the activity of disruptive stimuli.¹

Selye used the term *stress* to mean ‘the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it’. He called this reaction General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) which proceeds in three successive stages: the alarm reaction stage, the resistance stage, the exhaustion stage. In the first stage, the body mobilises its defence mechanisms and responds with particular, non-specific physiological changes. The second stage is a period of relative adaptation – the body opposes the constantly acting harmful factor. In principle, during this phase, the body tolerates the stressor affecting it well. The last stage, exhaustion, occurs when the exposure to harmful

¹ See N. Ogińska-Bulik, Z. Juczyński, *Osobowość. Stres a zdrowie*, Difin, Warszawa 2010, p. 46.

factors is prolonged or too intense. On a physiological level, the body responds with an increase in generalised agitation. What follows is a dysregulation of physiological functions and a decrease in the performance of the body defence mechanisms.²

The high level of stress is inherent in the activities conducted by uniformed services, because they are constantly in a state of high nervous arousal. Officers live in a state of increased alertness and are subject to psychological, mental, emotional and physical challenges. They do not have an opportunity to isolate themselves from stressors. Participation in exhausting actions, risking one's own and others' lives, availability demands, lack of professional stability, public pressure, the necessity to make quick decisions and the use of weapons are additional stressful factors. Chronic exposure to stress causes an excessive burden on the nervous system and requires above-average mental effort. However, the experience of traumatic stress has not only negative health consequences on a psychological level, but it also contributes to the reduction of motivation to work and affects the way of performing tasks. Officers, soldiers and representatives of other uniformed services who have experienced long-term traumatic stress are at risk for suffering occupational burnout, developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and/or depression as well as many other disorders.

The *Articles* section of this publication includes the papers on the subjects related to stress in uniformed services: the assessment of the conditions and consequences of the actions of soldiers and policemen during the conflict on the Polish-Belarusian border (by Krzysztof Janik and Andrzej Skowroński), the phenomenon of combat stress in the Polish Armed Forces (by Monika Ostrowska and Cezary Podlasiński), burnout among police officers (by Jerzy Gut and Kamil Niedziela), the changes in the perception of gender stereotypes in the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic (by Michal Pružinský, Bohuslava Michalcowa), apolitical attitude in the Polish Police (by Iwona Osmólska, Józef Pruchniak), burnout among police officers serving at the Krakow Constabulary (by Monika Ostrowska, Renata Stojeczka-Zuber) and management of the organisational culture of fear (by Kazimierz Nagodny-Mrozowicz, Konstanty Mrozowicz). In the *From the History* section we present Janusz Wojtycza's paper on the subject of participation of young people from Lesser Poland and Cieszyn Silesia in the fights for the Cieszyn Region and Silesian Uprisings in the years 1919–1921.

² See A. Piotrowski, *Stres i wypalenie zawodowe funkcjonariuszy Służby Więziennej*, Difin, Warszawa 2010, p. 45.