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Mitigating SAD States and Maladaptive Coping in Law Enforcement: Enhance Emotional Competence

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Abstract: Mental health is as essential as physical health for law enforcement officers to protect our country and communities. Law enforcement professionals frequently encounter stressors that can lead to maladaptive coping strategies and contribute to elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (SAD). This study aimed to evaluate the emotional competency and coping mechanisms utilized by police officers and their impact on psychosocial challenges within the force. Additionally, the research sought to determine the prevalence and influence of stress, anxiety, and depression (SAD) among Rajasthani police officers. A total of 689 officers participated in the survey. After data cleaning, 681 responses were considered complete and suitable for analysis. The findings reveal a concerning prevalence of anxiety, depression, and stress among police officers, exacerbated by their use of maladaptive coping mechanisms to navigate these challenges. The study emphasizes the importance of prioritizing the psychological health of law enforcement professionals. It advocates for interventions designed to reduce symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression (SAD) and encourages police officers to adopt healthier coping mechanisms. The use of emotional coping techniques has been shown to significantly reduce SAD among police officers. These findings underscore the need to address emotional competence as a fundamental component of police officer training and support systems. By equipping law enforcement professionals with the necessary skills to navigate stressors and build resilience, organizations can promote the psychological well-being of officers and enhance overall job performance and satisfaction. This study emphasizes the imperative of investing in the mental health of law enforcement officers and calls for concerted efforts to bolster their overall well-being and optimize their performance in safeguarding communities.

Introduction

The police department is the foundation of law and order in any country, as they are liable for keeping everything under control, answering crises, building local area connections and forestalling and tending to wrongdoing. Their presence and commitment to the local area contribute essentially to public security and the prosperity of residents. Police officers are working with resources being insufficient than the required to stop crime and maintain the safety of common people.

There is adequate proof to archive the occupation-related stress among the police because of long plans for getting work done/working hours, work-related awful mishaps, non-accessibility of sufficient leaves/obligation off periods, getting presented to human affliction, administrative pressures, lack of resources, Increased workload, and public scrutiny (Collins and Gibbs 2003; Violanti et al., 2017; Segovia, 2024). The presence of stress, anxiety and depression due to the nature of the work as police officers routinely face various risks and

potential dangers while carrying out their duties (Johnson et al., 2005; Madhu, 2018; Madhu and Manna, 2010, 2021; Madhu et al., 2024; Cristina et al., 2020; Yadav et al., 2022). The recent studies conducted by other researchers also highlight the high prevalence of stress, anxiety and depression among law enforcement officers (Bhattacharjee, 2022; Savarimalai et al., 2023; Kaur et al., 2023; Jamdade and Wange, 2023; Ramloganet al., 2020; Halder, 2024).

When the old ways and methods don't work and lead to psychological distress (stress, anxiety, and depression), in the absence of knowledge about pragmatic ways, they try to calm themselves with maladaptive coping (Otto and Gatens, 2022). Maladaptive methods are the techniques that a person uses to attempt to reduce their stress, anxiety, or psychological distress, but in a useless and corrupt way. Using such maladaptive coping serves no purpose; rather, it negatively influences the psycho-physical health of police officers. Law enforcement personnel must maintain good mental and physical health to effectively protect our nation and its communities.

Passive or avoidant strategies, such as binge drinking excessive amounts of alcohol, are often seen as maladaptive and harmful coping mechanisms. Substance use, behavioral disengagement, and self-distraction coping mechanisms are some of the maladaptive coping mechanisms police officers use to deal with SAD (stress, anxiety and depression). Substance abuse is the consumption of extreme amounts of alcohol and taking permissible and prohibited drugs. Police professionals are infamous for the use of alcohol (Padilla, 2016; Singo and Shilubane, 2022). Behavioral disengagement strategies are when individuals attempt to lessen their efforts to manage the stressor in any incident, surrendering the attempt to achieve objectives that are causing distress. Strategies involving disengagement increase the probability of experiencing enduring distress and developing post-traumatic stress disorder (Hennig-Fast et al., 2009). Self-distraction strategy is a passive coping strategy in that the individual tries to cope with their distress without directly confronting the situation or trying to solve the problem, which is the cause of the mental struggle they are facing (Allen and Leary, 2010).

Personal characteristics like emotional competence can help influence stress and psychological distress (anxiety and depression). Emotional competence refers to the fundamental skill set and interactive abilities of an individual to perceive, decipher, and act according to feelings in oneself and others. It has four components: one is being aware of your own emotions, the second is managing your own emotions, it incorporates not just being able to recognize and manage your emotions but also recognizing other's emotions and managing and maintaining a good relationship with them too, these are the third and fourth component of the emotional competence. Many studies have suggested that emotional competence, being able to identify emotions, is correlated with depression, anxiety and other catalogues of well-being (Ciarrochi et al., 2003; Cicchetti et al., 2000; Das et al., 2019). Individuals with high emotional competence can easily adjust their emotions according to the situation and surroundings. Police officers encounter numerous challenging situations daily due to their community-based roles. They are directly accountable for their actions and undertake a variety of tasks based on community needs, such as maintaining public order, enforcing laws, issuing authorizations, and granting permits (Violanti et al., 2017).

The rationale of the study

Police officers face numerous tough situations on their everyday schedule since they work in society; they are straightforwardly responsible for their activities and embrace many tasks relying upon the necessities of society, such as maintaining law and order and preventing crime while trying to make peace throughout the nation. Psychological distress can often weaken the social functioning of the human being, and the same applies to police professionals.

Research on the impact of job-related stress on mental health reveals a negative relationship between stress and a number of mental health outcomes, including emotions of achievement, accomplishment, self-worth, and life satisfaction (Srivastava, 1991). As we all know, police organization is the backbone of law and order, so police professionals' mental well-being is as important as their physical health.

Police are facing mental health problems due to the nature of their job, and they often face emotionally disturbing situations (murder, violence, crimes, etc.), which can cost them their mental health. Many researchers have proposed that having skills and being able to recognize emotions is associated with stress, anxiety, and depression in university students (Ciarrochi et al., 2003; Cicchetti et al., 2000). Emotional competence is vital for police officers to ensure they can carry out their duties effectively, ethically, and safely while maintaining the trust and support of the communities they serve. Training and promoting emotional competence in law enforcement can positively impact officer well-being and community relations.

Recognizing the physical, emotional, and psychological demands of police work, this study was conducted to study the influence of emotional competence on stress and psychological distress (anxiety and depression) and its relationship with maladaptive coping among police officers.

Objectives of the study

The objective of the study was to investigate psychological distress- stress, anxiety, and depression and their effect on police officers' negative or maladaptive coping mechanisms such as substance use, behavioral disengagement, and self-distraction coping mechanisms and their impact on psychosocial issues among police personnel.

Also, it explores what effect officers' ability as emotional competence has on stress and psychological distress among police officers. It examines factors that significantly influence police officers' maladaptive coping mechanisms.

Hypothesis

H1: Anxiety, depression, and stress will positively and significantly influence maladaptive coping mechanisms used by Police officers.

H2: Emotional competence will negatively and significantly influence psychological distress (anxiety, depression and stress) among Police officers.

Methodology

Participants were explicitly informed in the survey invitation that they had the option to decline participation and that their informed consent was required if they chose to take part. The survey link indicated that those unwilling to participate could ignore the message. The survey questionnaire was made available in Hindi. It took participants approximately 25 min to finish the survey.

Participants

This is a cross-sectional study conducted among police personnel serving in Rajasthan. To be eligible for inclusion in the study, participants were required to be actively on duty at various police stations, check posts, and fields in Rajasthan (India) and have at least three years of work experience. A total of 689 officers participated in the study. The data were collected between January-July 2022. The average age of the participants was 33 years. After cleaning the data, 681 responses were found complete and suitable for analysis.

Procedure

Before the study commenced, ethical approval was obtained from the institutional committee. The research protocol, including the study objectives, methodology, informed consent procedures and measures to ensure participant confidentiality and privacy, was submitted for review. After careful consideration, the committee approved the research protocol, affirming that the study adhered to ethical principles and standards. Participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the study, their rights as research participants, potential risks and benefits, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their inclusion in the study.

It was an online survey that was conducted using Google Forms. After obtaining approval from the appropriate authorities, a survey link was generated and distributed via Gmail and WhatsApp. Additionally, the link was disseminated using the snowballing technique, where police personnel were encouraged to share it with their colleagues on WhatsApp after receiving it.

The survey included the following instruments:

1. Personal Qualities and Demographics: A basic information sheet covering age, gender, marital status, family details, educational background, current job description, duty inquiries, and related information.

For all other study variables, respondents rated their responses using the five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 to express varying degrees of agreement from least to most. A higher score denotes higher presence/reporting of that variable.

Tools used

- **Anxiety:** The GAD-7 represents an anxiety measure based on seven items. It was developed by Spitzer, Kroenke, Williams, and Lowe (2006). The Cronbach's alpha value for the present sample was 0.83.
- **Depression:** To assess the presence of depressive symptoms, PHQ-9 was used. Spitzer, Williams, and Kroenke developed this instrument in 1999. It has nine items. The Cronbach's alpha value for the present sample was 0.87.
- **Stress:** Stress was assessed by a scale consisting of 11 items. Among these 11 items, seven items were selected from DASS-21 developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995), and four items from the Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein Perceived Stress Scale (1983). The Cronbach's alpha value for the present sample was 0.88.

Table 1. Results related to correlation analysis explaining the relationship among variables under study.

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Anxiety	1	.799**	.719**	.247**	.196**	.197**	-.206*
2	Depression		1	.805**	.233**	.213**	.205**	-.233**
3	Stress			1	.258**	.255**	.265**	-.287**
4	Self-Distraction Coping				1	.170**	.220**	-.094
5	Substance Use Coping					1	.400**	-.140
6	Behavioural Disengagement Coping						1	-.133
7	Emotional Competence							1

- **Coping:** Maladaptive coping mechanisms were assessed by selecting 15 items from the COPE Inventory developed by Carver (2013). The participants provided their responses using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha value for the present sample was 0.89.

- **Emotional Competence:** The scale used to assess emotional competence has been developed by Sharma and Bharadwaj (2007). The scale has 30 items to measure five emotional competencies. Since the questions are related to various situations/ experiences, options in the response category are different for different questions. Respondents rated their responses using the five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 for varying degrees of agreement from least to most with the options. The Cronbach's alpha value for the present sample was 0.78.

Results

The present study explored the prevalence of Anxiety, stress, and exhaustion among police officers serving in Rajasthan. It was also intended to identify the influence of emotional competence on psychological well-being and coping strategies in managing psychological well-being among police officers serving in Rajasthan.

Data collected were analyzed accordingly, and this section presents the results of the data analysis.

Results of correlation analysis revealed that anxiety, depression, and stress are significantly positively correlated. There is a significant positive correlation between psychological disturbance markers (anxiety, depression and stress) and dysfunctional coping styles (self-distraction coping, substance use coping, and behavioral disengagement coping).

A significant negative correlation was found between emotional competence and psychological disturbance

Table 2. Summary of regression analysis of Emotional competence with anxiety.

R	R Square	Change Statistics			Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		R Square Change	F Change	Sig. F Change	Beta		
.206	.043	.043	30.039	.000	-.206	5.481	.000

Analysis of data

Statistical analyses were undertaken using MS Excel and SPSS software. The reliability of the various sections of the tool was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha with fair

markers (anxiety, depression and stress). Emotional competence was negatively correlated with dysfunctional coping styles (substance use coping and behavioral disengagement coping).

Table 3. Summary of regression analysis of Emotional competence with depression.

		Change Statistics			Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
					Beta		
R	R Square	R Square Change	F Change	Sig. F Change			
.233	.054	.054	38.756	.000	-.233	6.225	.000

values, making it a reliable tool for study. Pearson's correlation coefficient was utilized to assess relationships between different variables. Wherever applicable, regression analysis was applied.

These findings mentioned above provide support for hypothesis number 1 and 2.

Emotional competence was found to be a statistically significant and positive predictor of anxiety (explained by 4.3 % of the total variance), as indexed by the R^2 statistic. Thus, the result indicates emotional competence's

significant effect on anxiety. The finding provides support for H2.

Anxiety was found to be a statistically significant and positive predictor of self-distraction coping (explained by

Table 4. Summary of regression analysis of Emotional competence with stress.

R	R Square	Change Statistics			Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		R Square Change	F Change	Sig. F Change	Beta		
.287	.082	.082	60.564	.000	-.287	7.782	.000

Table 5. Summary of regression analysis of anxiety with substance use coping.

R	R Square	Change Statistics			Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		R Square Change	F Change	Sig. F Change	Beta		
.196	.038	.038	26.903	.000	.196	5.187	.000

Emotional competence was found to be a statistically significant and positive predictor of depression

6.1 % of the total variance), as indexed by the R^2 statistic. Thus, the result indicates anxiety's significant effect on

Table 6. Summary of regression analysis of anxiety with self-distraction coping.

R	R Square	Change Statistics			Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		R Square Change	F Change	Sig. F Change	Beta		
.247	.061	.061	43.755	.000	.247	6.615	.000

(explained by 5.4 % of the total variance), as indexed by the R^2 statistic. Thus, the result indicates emotional competence's significant effect on depression. The

self-distraction coping.

Anxiety was found to be a statistically significant and positive predictor of behavioral disengagement coping

Table 7. Summary of regression analysis of anxiety with behavioural disengagement coping.

R	R Square	Change Statistics			Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		R Square Change	F Change	Sig. F Change	Beta		
.197	.039	.039	27.222	.000	.197	5.217	.000

Table 8. Summary of regression analysis of depression with substance use coping.

R	R Square	Change Statistics			Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		R Square Change	F Change	Sig. F Change	Beta		
.213	.045	.045	32.003	.000	.213	5.657	.000

finding provides support for H2.

Emotional competence was found to be a statistically significant and positive predictor of stress (explained by 8.2 % of the total variance), as indexed by the R^2 statistic. Thus, the result indicates emotional competence's significant effect on stress. The finding provides support for H2.

Anxiety was found to be a statistically significant and positive predictor of substance use coping (explained by 3.8 % of the total variance), as indexed by the R^2 statistic. Thus, the result indicates anxiety's significant effect on substance use coping.

(explained 3.9 % of the total variance), as indexed by the R^2 statistic. Thus, the result indicates anxiety's significant effect on behavioral disengagement coping.

Depression was found to be a statistically significant and positive predictor of substance use coping (explained by 4.5 % of the total variance), as indexed by the R^2 statistic. Thus, the result indicates a significant effect of depression on substance use coping.

Depression was found to be a statistically significant and positive predictor of self-distraction coping (explained by 5.4 % of the total variance), as indexed by the R^2 statistic. Thus, the result indicates a significant effect of depression on self-distraction coping.

Table 9. Summary of regression analysis of depression with self-distraction use coping.

R	R Square	Change Statistics			Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		R Square Change	F Change	Sig. F Change	Beta		
.233	.054	.054	38.836	.000	.233	6.232	.000

Table 10. Summary of regression analysis of depression with behavioral disengagement coping.

R	R Square	Change Statistics			Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		R Square Change	F Change	Sig. F Change	Beta		
.205	.042	.042	29.462	.000	.205	5.428	.000

Table 11. Summary of regression analysis of stress with substance use coping.

R	R Square	Change Statistics			Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		R Square Change	F Change	Sig. F Change	Beta		
.255	.065	.065	47.013	.000	.255	6.857	.000

Table 12. Summary of regression analysis of stress with self-distraction use coping.

R	R Square	Change Statistics			Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		R Square Change	F Change	Sig. F Change	Beta		
.258	.067	.067	48.170	.000	.258	6.940	.000

Table 13. Summary of regression analysis of stress with behavioral disengagement coping.

R	R Square	Change Statistics			Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		R Square Change	F Change	Sig. F Change	Beta		
.265	.070	.070	50.808	.000	.265	7.128	.000

Depression was found to be a statistically significant and positive predictor of behavioral disengagement coping (explained by 4.2% of the total variance), as indexed by the R^2 statistic. Thus, the result indicates a significant effect of depression on behavioral disengagement coping.

Stress was found to be a statistically significant and positive predictor of substance use coping (explained by 6.5 % of the total variance), as indexed by the R^2 statistic. Thus, the result indicates stress's significant effect on substance use coping.

Stress was found to be a statistically significant and positive predictor of self-distraction coping (explained by 6.7 % of the total variance), as indexed by the R^2 statistic. Thus, the result indicates stress's significant effect on self-distraction coping.

Stress was found to be a statistically significant and positive predictor of behavioral disengagement coping (explained by 7 % of the total variance), as indexed by the R^2 statistic. Thus, the result indicates stress's significant effect on behavioral disengagement coping.

Discussion and Conclusion

The police force stands as the primary driving force and essential contributor to upholding law and order in the country and managing critical situations like implementing strict lockdown measures across the country during COVID outbreak. The psychological health of police officers is of significant importance for several reasons. Suppose they are struggling with mental health issues. In that case, it can impair their decision-making, judgment, and response to critical situations, potentially endangering both their own lives and the safety of the communities they serve. Therefore, this study aimed to evaluate the psychological challenges faced by police officers in Rajasthan, India.

A total of 681 police officers completed an online survey, providing a sufficient sample size for drawing robust conclusions. The research investigated coping

strategies and mental health issues, including depression, stress, and anxiety among the participants.

The findings revealed that 338 out of the 681 participants (49.6%) reported experiencing relatively high levels of anxiety (rated 9 or higher). This indicates that nearly half of the sample population reported significant anxiety levels. Two hundred fifty-five participants (37.5%) participants reported a moderately high amount of depression (scored 12 or more), whereas 299 participants (44%) reported a moderately high amount of stress (scored 13 or more). The results of this study should not be interpreted as indicative of psychiatric illness due to the use of brief screening tools for assessment. However, it is important to note that these instruments are sensitive enough to detect symptoms, making it difficult to discount these results entirely.

There are limited studies that directly compare our findings regarding the mental health of police officers in similar challenging circumstances. Earlier Indian studies examining occupational stress factors among police officers in routine duties in Mumbai, Maharashtra, and Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, found that approximately 18% of surveyed personnel reported high levels of stress, with roughly 73–88% reporting moderate levels (Almale et al., 2014; Kamble and Phalke, 2011).

Earlier studies on police personnel mainly focused on organizational job-related stress and burnout (Nelson and Smith, 2016) and have reported significant job-related stress. The present study also revealed that the perceived stress in the police personnel was moderately high, and the perceived stress was significantly associated with depressive and anxiety symptoms in the study sample.

Results related to the influence of anxiety, depression and stress also revealed an important fact. The correlation and regression analysis findings clearly outline a significant positive relationship between mental health disturbances and maladaptive coping mechanisms. Personnel experiencing anxiety, depression, and stress are prone to use maladaptive coping mechanisms more often. Among the significant correlates of stress, anxiety, and depression are alcohol and drug use. Personnel experiencing high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress often struggle with adaptive coping strategies, thereby increasing the risk of using maladaptive coping mechanisms (Doyle et al., 2021).

Being a police officer is a challenging task. Police officers are usually on the front line, dealing with violent situations, dangerous criminal activities, and life-or-death scenarios. Most of their work involves dealing with strong emotions and stressful situations. The results related to the contribution of emotional competence also discovered some significant observations. Emotional competence significantly influences the possibility of feeling anxiety, depression, and stress. Emotional competence has been suggested as a protective factor against stress, anxiety, and depression, which can be used to regulate psychological circumstances and behavior. Research indicates that difficulties related to rumination, including challenges in recognizing, describing, and labeling emotions, are linked to elevated levels of anxiety and reduced levels of positive emotions (Ciarrochi and Scott, 2006; Doyle et al., 2021).

Results revealed that emotional competence plays a significant role in reducing stress, anxiety, and depression among police officers. It helps officers build resilience, enabling them to bounce back from challenging and distressing situations. It allows officers to navigate professional and community relationships more effectively, reducing conflicts and improving communication. It also helps officers regulate their emotions, preventing emotional outbursts or suppression that can lead to long-term stress and mental health issues (Violanti et al., 2017). Emotional competence provides officers with healthier coping mechanisms to deal with the psychological toll of their work. Instead of resorting to negative coping strategies, they can employ adaptive techniques that reduce the risk of developing anxiety or depression. These results emphasize the urgent requirement for thorough psychiatric assessment and continuous supervision of law enforcement officers. They also underscore the essential need for psychological support tailored to the unique stressors faced by police officers in their line of duty.

As the risk is inherent to the police job, this high level of anxiety and stress is going to persist and increase possibly. There is a need to develop policy provisions to develop appropriate skills among police officers to deal with this psychological distress with positive coping mechanisms and attitudes (Edwards et al., 2021) well-being of police officers. The first approach could be to raise awareness about mental health issues among them. Second, to recognize and manage their psychological difficulties, it may be beneficial to organize training and workshops within the police department (Craddock and Telesco, 2022). Because of the high workload and stress, programs that focus on positive coping skills and building emotional competence can help alleviate psychological suffering. Di Nota, Kasurak, Bahji, Groll & Anderson (2021) found that coping strategies like social support, resilience training, and emotion-focused coping are effective in mitigating stress, anxiety, and depression. The study also advocates for police agencies to support

these coping techniques to improve officers' wellbeing. Unlike other professions, police work often places officers in the public eye for negative reasons. Understanding the perspectives of police officers and the specific stresses they face in enforcing laws and maintaining order is crucial. Raising awareness of these challenges can promote greater public compliance with laws and regulations, potentially reducing stress among police officers. In conclusion, this study reveals that police officers frequently resort to maladaptive coping methods to deal with the stress, anxiety, and depression inherent in their roles. These findings highlight the need for enhanced mental health interventions tailored to address the psychological challenges encountered by law enforcement personnel. A healthy coping style is supposed to be developed among this worthy personnel, and emotional competence may be helpful.

Limitations and future suggestions

Mental health challenges have emerged as a secondary pandemic during and after Covid-19. This study sheds light on often-overlooked issues within the criminal justice system, offering valuable insights. These findings are crucial for policymakers aiming to enhance mental health support for frontline workers. However, the study's utility is constrained by its cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported data, which limits a deeper exploration. Given the sensitivity of mental health, particularly among police personnel, future research should consider employing a mixed-method approach. This approach could provide a more comprehensive understanding by examining demographic variables, cultural influences, and various psychosocial and organizational factors intersecting with mental health issues.

Implications of the study

In general, the possibility of developing these psychological disturbances is high among police officers. Most law enforcement officers do not seek care for mental health issues. The stigmatization of mental health is a significant factor that prevents police officers from getting help. The notion that those who seek mental health services are unfit to serve as officers in the criminal justice system is a barrier to maintaining psychological well-being among these professionals.

The results of the study endorse that a proper system for diagnosing and managing mental health must be developed within their approach. Officers agreed to use a maladaptive coping style, which harms their psychological and physical health. Police administration must accept the need to develop a tailor-made

sensitization and training program to replace maladaptive coping with adaptive coping mechanisms.

Police officers are usually on the front line, dealing with strong emotions and charged situations. Taking appropriate steps to improve emotional competence in police staff is highly crucial for their psychological well-being. The emotional competence of these officers is also of great importance in handling everyday challenges because a policeman's job involves dealing with hostile and aggressive criminal elements while maintaining good rapport and relationships with law-abiding citizens. A proper hands-on experience workshop is supposed to be organized for these officers to learn ways to experience, express, and manage emotions. This will benefit the officers and enhance their ability to serve and protect their communities effectively.

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