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The Other Side of Burnout: An Ethnographic Study of Exemplary Performance and Health among Probation Officers Supervising High-Risk Offenders

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Abstract

Prior studies of stress experienced by probation officers have focused on the negative effects of stress upon professional performance and personal and organizational health. This study identified probation officers recognized for their sustained performance and health and utilized individual questionnaires and focus group discussions to identify those strategies used to achieve and sustain such performance and health. The major stressors experienced by participants included role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload, challenges to personal and professional integrity, and difficulties managing personal-professional boundaries. Strategies used to successfully manage these stressors reported in survey questionnaires included the cultivation of certain qualities (e.g., sense of humor) and ideas (recognition of the limitations of the probation officer role); support from intimate and family relationships, peers within the work environment, and relationships in one's extra-work social network; and stress-ameliorating activities (hobbies, self-monitoring, exercise, professional training). Focus group discussions revealed additional strategies for performance and health enhancement: focusing on the positive, physical and emotional self-monitoring, acts of self-care, limit-setting, boundary management, centering rituals, mirroring rituals, and unpaid acts of service outside the work environment.

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Introduction

Probation officers play an ever-larger role in the American criminal-justice system, but this role entails exposure to stressors that can erode professional performance and personal health (Whitehead & Lindquist, 1985). Research on probation officer stress is meager compared to research on stress in other roles in the criminal justice system (e.g., police officers, correctional officers), but existing studies confirm that probation officers experience role ambiguity and role conflict, role safety concerns, low pay and promotional opportunities, excessive paperwork, lack of administrative/supervisory support, and lack of participation in organizational decision-making (Whitehead, 1985; Whitehead & Linquist, 1985; Brown, 1987; Holgate & Clegg, 1991; Lindner & Koehler, 1992; Linder & Del Castillo, 1994; Lindner & Bonn, 1996; Whitehead, 1987; Whisler, 1994; Slate, Wells, & Johnson, 2003). Probation officers experience added pressure when the decisions they make or fail to make affect public safety via injury to others from acts of violence, e.g., assault or alcohol and other drug-related crashes caused by those they supervise. Prolonged exposure to such stressors in the absence of stress-mediating supports can lead to stress-related health problems, excessive behaviors (e.g., risk-taking behavior), emotional problems, disengagement from or over-involvement in professional and personal relationships, and changes in basic values (e.g., cynicism) (White, 1997; Curtis, Reese, & Cone, 1990). At an organizational level such stressors contribute to job dissatisfaction, interpersonal and inter-unit conflict, and officer turnover (Simmons, Cochran, & Blount, 1997). The deterioration of personal and professional functioning resulting from prolonged contact with high-stress work environments has been described as “burnout” (Maslach, 1982), “compassion fatigue” (Figley, 1995), and “secondary traumatic stress” (Stamm, 1995).

Studies to date of probation officer stress have focused on the negative effects of stress on the individual officer and the health of the organization and have sought to extract proactive strategies to ameliorate professional stress. The current study utilizes a quite different approach. Over the years the authors have been struck by the existence of officers who, while experiencing the same stressors as their peers, maintain a remarkably high level of professional performance and personal health. Our goal in this study was to identify a group of such long-tenured superperformers and see what could be learned about how they managed the stressors of probation work in such an exemplary manner. Because of our concurrent involvement in multiple projects involving probation supervision of DUI offenders, we were also interested in studying superperformers whose caseloads included DUI and other high-risk offenders. It is our hope that this brief qualitative study of a small sample of high-functioning probation officers will stimulate additional studies of exemplary performance and health in the criminal justice system.

Methodology

The chief probation officers or supervisors in fifteen county-probation departments in Illinois were contacted by the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts (AOIC) to solicit their interest in a study of exemplary performance among probation officers. All agreed to allow an officer selected by the AOIC to participate in the study. The fifteen county-probation offices included urban, suburban, and rural settings and spanned offices of varying size (from two to 124 probation officers). The officers chosen for inclusion in the study were selected by the two senior staff of AOIC responsible for monitoring probation departments in the state of Illinois. The AOIC monitors were in a unique position to nominate participants due to the longevity of their

direct work with these departments and their probation officers. Five criteria were used to select participants for study recruitment:

- 1) Longevity (at least three years' tenure as a probation officer)
- 2) A caseload that included offenders arrested two or more times for driving under the influence of alcohol or supervision of such cases
- 3) Exemplary performance (a sustained, high level of professional performance)
- 4) Positiveness (an attitude of optimism that has exerted a positive influence on probationers and professional peers)
- 5) Personal health (sustained physical, emotional, and relational health over the span of his or her career).

All fifteen individuals nominated were contacted in June/July of 2004 and consented to participate in the study. Participation in the study involved completion of an individual questionnaire (See Appendix A) and participation in a regional focus group. Fourteen of the fifteen people nominated completed the questionnaire and participated in a focus group. The age range of participants was 31 to 61 years with a mean of 42.2 years. The sample was 14% male and 86% female. Participants varied in years of probation experience (3 to 26 years with a mean of 12.9 years) and worked in different demographic settings: 64% rural, 21% suburban, and 15% urban. Seventy-nine percent of participants had completed a bachelor's degree and 21% had a master's degree. The range of DUI cases within the caseloads of participants ranged from 3% to 100%, with a mean of 21.1%.

The individual questionnaire completed by each participant included a demographic profile (age, gender, ethnicity, education, occupation) and open-ended questions about his or her experience as a probation officer, philosophy of probation work, and strategies utilized to maintain a positive approach to his or her work. The questionnaire also contained a list of professional and personal activities that participants rated as to their importance in their sustained performance and health.

Each person selected for the study also participated in one of four regional focus groups after completing the individual questionnaire. The focus groups were conducted in August 2004 and were facilitated by field coordinators of the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts and by research staff from the Institute for Legal and Policy Studies at the University of Illinois-Springfield. Probation officers in the study were not paid for their participation but were reimbursed for travel expenses to attend the focus groups. Each focus group included an average of three to four participants, lasted approximately two hours, and addressed the following eight questions:

1. What characteristics distinguish the best probation officers?
2. What are the major stressors of working as a probation officer?
3. What special stressors exist in the supervision of high-risk DUI offenders?
4. How would you characterize the personal and professional self-care of most probation officers?
5. What special obstacles to professional and personal self-care exist for probation officers?
6. What strategies or techniques have you found to be most beneficial in terms of your own personal and professional self-care?
7. What advice would you give a new probation officer about how to be a good probation officer while maintaining his or her personal health?
8. What could the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts and local probation departments do that would enhance the personal and professional self-care of probation officers?

Responses on the individual questionnaires were analyzed, and focus group interviews were transcribed (without names of participants) and analyzed for dominant themes and recommendations. The study design and informed-consent process was reviewed and approved by the Human Subjects Review Board of the University of Illinois-Springfield.

Results

The study findings are presented in five topical areas: traits linked to exemplary performance of probation officers, stressors of probation work, stressors unique to managing high-risk offenders, obstacles to professional self-care by probation officers, personal strategies for ameliorating stress and optimizing performance, and organizational strategies to enhance probation officer health and performance.

Professional Traits Linked to Exemplary Performance The stress in any occupational role is fundamentally a function of role-person match—the congruence between the demands of a particular role and the nature of the knowledge, skill, and temperament each individual brings to that role (White, 1997). When asked what characteristics were most crucial for exemplary performance by probation officers, respondents expressed a high degree of unanimity. First, they felt that preoccupation with financial wealth, public or professional recognition, and rapid career advancement were disqualifying factors due to the modest salaries of most probation officers, the public invisibility of the day-to-day work of the probation officer, and the limited feedback and career-advancement potential in most probation departments. Failure by many to recognize the nature of the probation officer role as a career choice was perceived as a potential source of stress and discontent. Second, they reported that the following characteristics were most important to prolonged success as a probation officer: maturity, tolerance, open-mindedness, flexibility, technical competence, self-confidence, patience, integrity, honesty, humor, and humility. When asked to describe the core values that guided their work as a probation officer, participant responses clustered similarly around the values of honesty, integrity, and respect. Focus group discussions centered on the need for compassion, the importance of a commitment to facilitating change in people's lives, and an understanding of how such change occurs. The ability to see the person beyond the offense was seen as crucial to effective probation work. Exemplary performance is built on an empathic recognition that, given different circumstances, the probation officer could be sitting in the probationer's seat. Considerable attention was also given to the ability to respond to the multiple role demands of probation work—demands in relationships with probationers, in relationships within the probation department and the larger court system, and in relationships with allied professionals and the public.

Probation Stressors Data from this study revealed three core stressors of probation work. The first stressor noted in the individual and group responses involved the role ambiguity and role conflict that is an inherent part of probation work. Respondents talked at length about the tension between their responsibilities to the courts and the public (monitoring and enforcement functions) versus their responsibilities to offenders (helping functions). The challenge of exemplary performance in probation work is the effective integration of these two quite different and potentially conflicting roles. This challenge is intensified by widely varying philosophies inside the criminal justice system and within probation departments regarding the ideal role of the probation officer. Probation officers are caught in the middle of cyclical philosophies of rehabilitation (the probation officer as a specialized social worker) and philosophies of "trail 'em, nail 'em, and jail 'em" (the probation officer as a specialized law-enforcement officer). This tension between these enforcement and rehabilitation functions leaves probation officers open to second-guessing and criticism. As one officer noted,

You feel the strain between the need for firmness and the need for flexibility. [As a probation officer] you need to know when to be authoritarian and when to hold back a bit longer and let your client work something through. We operate with the constant awareness that we can be criticized for being too harsh or too lax in the management of any case.

The second major stressor identified by respondents was that of role overload—excessive demands related to the quality and quantity of work expected within particular time periods. This stressor expresses itself as a tension between system demands (e.g., predictable deadlines for client visits, reports, and court appearances; unexpected emergencies) versus the needs of assigned probationers. Frustrations can easily arise when aspects of the former (e.g., endless waiting for court appearances) conflict with critical needs of clients (e.g., need for readmission to addiction treatment or admission to domestic-violence shelter services). Comments like the following expressed this strain.

I can have somebody's file pulled because they are a higher-risk person and I want to focus on his supervision and service needs, and then the sixteen stupid things that I shouldn't have to be dealing with at all come walking in the door. At the end of the day I realize that the one person I really should've been spending time with didn't get any time. That frustrates me because, let's face it, those are the cases that potentially are going to blow up in your face.

I had to work this past Saturday. I have so much to do that I can't get it done in my normal work hours, even though I try to protect my weekends for my family and close friends.

I understand budget cuts and counties being reluctant to pay for extra officers, but when I started our average caseload was about eighty and it's literally double that now, plus the increased expectations for home visits, additional documentation, and casework—all on a 100% felony caseload. You have this overwhelming number of cases to deal with, and if something goes wrong, you start wondering, "Could I have done something better before this client committed another crime?" Such issues can wear probation officers down.

Study participants noted the need to strike a balance between these multiple demands but emphasized the need to stay client-focused in that process.

. . . there certainly is the time factor to consider, and yet when I'm with a client, I want that person to believe that right then, they matter to me more than anything—that I'm listening to what they're saying, responding to what they're saying, and that I don't have one eye on the clock. And yet realistically, I have to keep them focused. It takes good training for a probation officer to have the skills to attend to that individual while managing the limited hours in the workday. It's a delicate balance.

Role-integrity conflict—incongruence between personal values and workplace values or challenges to one's personal integrity—was the third major stressor of probation work identified by study participants. This most often took the form of disrespect of their role or person from others within the criminal justice system, e.g., judges, state attorneys, and law enforcement officers.

The stress comes from the judge, the state's attorney, the police, the jail staff, and the county board. And the only times I ever get mad and want to say, "I'm outta here," is when

too many egos get in the way of getting something worked out. I really enjoy the job. . . . I can handle the probationer, but for the judge and the state's attorney and others to have expectations that we [probation officers] can do things that we can't is frustrating.

The need to understand the politics of probation work and the complex system in which probation work occurs was noted by most respondents. The following comment is typical.

I find the frustrations generated by the bureaucracy most stressful. As soon as politics come into play, it drives me nuts. And there is the constant funding crisis and worry about where we are going to get money for this and how are we going to do that.

There was considerable discussion on the importance of probation officers individually and collectively establishing mutual respect within the multiple professional relationships inherent in probation work. As one participant noted, "The key is to find out what makes each judge or state's attorney tick and what makes the person respond well to you."

Challenges to the integrity of probation officers can also come from family members of offenders and victims as well as the public.

We get calls from family members, neighbor, or victims wanting to report some concern about a probationer. They demand, "Why aren't you people doing something?" Probation officers are blanketed within this "you people" category. It is not an endearing term. When we try to explain what we can and can't do in response to such complaints, they have difficulty understanding the legal limitations we operate under.

The problem of spillover from these role stressors—the leakage of professional stress into one's personal and family life—was raised as a concern in all of the focus groups. The following comments are typical.

Most probation officers' lives are kind of chaotic due to the size of our caseloads and the nature of who we have to deal with. It's hard not to reduce everything to self-preservation, routing people without getting in-depth, just to survive. At a personal level, I think most officers stay pretty closed up—like police officers. What do you do—go home and tell your wife or husband about the child abusers and rapists you saw in the office today? It's difficult for officers to not carry their work home and yet difficult not to be able to talk about it there.

There is a danger in getting caught up in negativity. A lot of our day is spent with negative people, and being caught up in all this negativity can really weigh on you. Sometimes you just want to say, "Why do I even bother." That negativity can poison your work life and your home life.

There are a lot of times I come home from work and I wish I didn't know so much about what goes on behind people's closed doors. Sometimes I would like to not know what's going on in the world. I just want to be in my own little house, my own little family, and deal with my own stuff, and not have to think about who's abusing who down the street.

In the discussions of probation officer stressors, several things were striking in their absence. First was the lack of stressors identified in working directly with criminal offenders. (The only exception was stress in working with probationers that posed a high risk to the community. See further discussion below.) This is congruent with other studies that have found that most stress experienced by probation officers is unrelated to direct contact with their clients

(Whitehead, 1987). Also striking was the lack of concern expressly related to role safety (threats to the physical or psychological safety of the probation officer) or role security (threats to the stability of future employment). Concerns about role safety arose only in one focus group in reference to home visits in southern Illinois to probationers dependent upon methamphetamine or involved in its manufacture.

Stressors with High-Risk Offenders When asked about particular stressors in working with high-risk DUI offenders (recidivists or individuals judged to be high risk for re-arrest or future alcohol-related crashes) and other high-risk groups (e.g., sex offenders, domestic-violence offenders), respondents focused on the visibility of such cases.

You feel intense pressure because you have such a responsibility to the community. These high-risk offenders pose such a potential threat to public safety that you feel pressure to find the right treatment for this person and to make sure that they're getting something out of it.

I think the intensity of the risk and the fact that progress [with high-risk offenders] is measured in such baby steps puts enormous pressure on probation officers. One little mistake and you're on the front page.

Supervising high-risk offenders was described as working in a fishbowl, with multiple parties watching and judging what the probation officer does or fails to do. Such accountability clashes with the illusion of normalcy of such offenders.

Many of these [DUI] offenders are functional people in society. They have a stable job and a family and some social standing. So it's a little bit different than the rest of the population that we have on probation. . . . And alcohol is such an accepted drug because nearly everyone consumes it and has driven under its influence at one point in their life. It's hard for the system and sometimes for us to see the DUI offender as a criminal—and yet they kill people.

The apparent normalcy of many high-risk DUI offenders can lead to lax supervision, requiring probation officers to constantly remind themselves of the public-safety stakes involved in their work with these offenders. The failure of the criminal justice system to see the DUI offender as a criminal contributes to probation officer frustration in seeing such offenders who have multiple DUIs (and sometimes multiple treatment-episodes) but who have managed to escape any significant punishment for their continued threat to public safety. In the absence of more significant sanctions the probation officer stands alone as the barrier between the DUI offender and his or her future threat to public safety.

Respondents also talked at length about the difficulty and slowness of the change process with high-risk offenders, particularly the high-risk offender's denial or minimization of their problems, the challenges of getting them to and through treatment experiences, and their propensity for relapse.

When the exemplary performers in this study talked about taking work-related stress home with them, it was almost always in the context of worry about a particular offender's threat to others. The following is typical of such concerns.

The worst weekend I've had on this job was when I found out late on a Friday afternoon that the jail had released a guy at least two months earlier than he should've been released. I spent the whole weekend worrying whether he was going to kill his ex-girlfriend. When I pointed out to the jail and the state's attorney that he was released too

early, nobody seemed to care. But, you know, that was a guy that I should've been paying more attention to in the weeks before he got out of jail and making sure that everything was set up for him.

Obstacles to Self-care Study participants did not identify many unique dimensions to self-care that distinguished probation officers from other occupations. They did talk about the cynicism that often pervades the criminal justice system and the almost contagious quality of such cynicism. Such cynicism was part of the “reality shock” that marked their entry into probation work.

I don't think I know if I was a positive person or a negative person when I first started. I just knew that when I got in, I saw a lot of what I didn't want to be. I looked around and I thought to myself, “If I stay, I hope I'm not like that.”

A second obstacle to professional self-care noted by focus group members was the limited access to outside professional training afforded to probation officers. Such limitation was thought to stem from the fact that training was one of the first things to be cut in the current wave of fiscal austerity measures and from the misperception that probation work requires less technical training than other professional roles.

The obstacle to self-care that received the most prolonged discussion in the focus groups was the lack of personal/professional separation in rural communities. The following comments illustrate the difficulty of leaving one's work at work in such settings.

In small communities, we are all interconnected. It brings a different kind of accountability. You can't just go home and forget about it because your neighbors are the people you are working with or know your clients. My husband will come home and say, “So-and-so's out of jail,” and I'll say, “No, he's not due for release yet,” and he'll say, “I just saw him in a car with his mother screaming at her about wanting money.”

I can be in the grocery store or at a Little League ballgame with my family and one of my clients will come up to me and ask, “Do you remember when my next appointment is?” Or I'll walk into the Dairy Queen and a client will announce to the world, “There's my probation officer.” And they tell us we're supposed to worry about confidentiality! Sometimes you get sucked back into your job at a time and place you're not expecting it.

Probation officers, particularly in rural communities, may also be held to a higher level of expectations related to their personal and family life. One participant explains:

You think to yourself that you can't go out in the community and unwind quite as much as other people, because when you go out into the community, people know you and watch you. You're not just expected to be a positive role model from eight to five; we live with expectations that are 24/7.

Self-care Strategies

Information on professional self-care strategies of exemplary performers in probation work was obtained in two ways. First, each study participant was asked to rate each item in a list of professional self-care strategies (drawn from the professional literature) based on each strategy's degree of importance in maintaining the worker's health and performance. The rating options were 1 (not important), 2 (important), and 3 (very important). There was a high degree of variability in ratings, with each of the seventeen items being ranked as very important by at least one participant. The average ratings for the seventeen items are displayed in Table 1. The

highest-ranking strategies involve the cultivation of certain qualities (e.g., sense of humor), relationships (intimate and family relationships, supportive relationships within the work environment, and supportive relationships in one’s extra-work social network), and activities (hobbies, self-monitoring, exercise, attending training).

Table 1: Professional Self-Care Strategies

Average Rating	Stress-reducing Activity
2.857	Cultivating a sense of humor
2.857	Having healthy intimate and family relationships
2.714	Having one or more close relationships at work in which I can express emotions related to my work experience
2.714	Having enjoyable hobbies/leisure activities
2.571	Maintaining relationships with professional peers who work outside the criminal justice system
2.571	Having one or more close friendships away from work in which I can express emotions related to my work experience
2.571	Avoiding or self-monitoring potentially harmful approaches to stress management (e.g., smoking, drinking, risk-taking, cynicism, and negativity)
2.5	Physical self-care (e.g., healthy diet, regular physical checkups)
2.5	Attending professional training
2.439	Cultivating relationships with other POs who have a positive attitude
2.429	Having alone-time rituals that keep me focused (e.g., meditation, prayer, self-reflection)
2.428	Getting regular exercise
2.071	Maintaining relationships with POs who work in other offices
1.928	Daily goal-setting and/or self-evaluation at end of the day
1.857	Having one or more professional mentors
1.857	Doing volunteer work unrelated to my job
1.714	Using particular stress-management techniques (e.g., biofeedback, meditation, progressive relaxation)

Participants in the focus groups were also asked to describe the strategies of personal and professional self-care that had contributed to their health and productivity. The following strategies were among those discussed.

A. Focusing on the Positive—The stressors experienced by the exemplary officers in this study are offset by satisfactions that they reported experiencing. What participants liked best about probation work was their experience of making a difference to individuals, families and communities; the diversity and challenges of their professional duties and experiences; depth of knowledge about the community; and the autonomy and creativity they are afforded in developing one’s own style of doing probation work.

B. Self-monitoring—Study participants felt that health and exemplary performance were not permanent achievements but states that had to be constantly monitored and renewed. They viewed self-monitoring and a highly personalized adaptation to the probation environment as the foundation of sustained health and performance.

I had to learn to listen to myself. Our minds and our bodies tell us what we need to do, but we just don't listen. When we aren't taking care of ourselves, our body, our thoughts, our emotions will tell us.

We have to follow our instincts. If we listen to ourselves, we know what we need to do. Even in decisions we make on the job. When I first started as a probation officer, I felt like a fish out of water because it was so different from what I had been doing. I was listening to what everybody was telling me and trying to incorporate all of those things into the way I was trying to do my job, but it didn't work very well. What I had to do was find my own way. I got a lot of good advice, but I had to put it together with what worked for me by listening to myself.

C. Acts of Self-care—Exemplary performers in probation work take care of themselves via exercise, healthy diet (although there was considerable discussion about the medicinal power of chocolate), and protecting time with family and friends. When they recognize that they are feeling distressed, they utilize a wide variety of decompression rituals that range from short time-out periods (getting outside, taking a brief walk, positive self-talk, and emotional self-expression to peers, a supervisor, and family and friends) or more extended breaks from the work environment.

Humor has a special place in probation work. There is cynical, cutting humor and humor that is liberating and healing. Our exemplary performers talked at length about the importance of the latter.

We [probation officers] are like a lot of high-stress professions in our propensity for gallows humor. We have this warped way of looking at things. We'll laugh at something that people who don't work in this field would never laugh at. It's a protective device that helps us deal with a lot of strong emotion.

It's the stupid things that I do in the office that embarrass me and all the things other people do that embarrass them. It's the ability to laugh at ourselves that keeps us healthy.

If I don't laugh about some of the stuff that goes on in our world, I'm gonna cry about it. You have to be able to turn some things that are difficult to handle into laughs.

Positive self-talk took a variety of forms but included self-reminders that the probation officer works within a flawed criminal-justice system—one that due to excessive demands and limited resources will always be flawed. Being able to accept the imperfections in the criminal justice system and one's limited role in that system was viewed as critical to long-term effectiveness and health as a probation officer.

Reminding myself that I am only a piece of this larger pie and that I can only be responsible for my own part helps keep me level and healthy.

The importance of time-out periods was noted by numerous participants. The following comments are representative.

When it gets too much, I get up and leave my office and walk outside or walk to the car. Sometimes I will get on the computer and check out the news for a few minutes. I get to a point I just have to take care of my own needs, and then I can come back to the work stuff and look at things differently and with a fresher perspective.

One thing that helps keep my sanity is that I always try to have something to look forward to. It doesn't have to be anything major, but it has to be yours. I try to have something each day—something within a relatively short-term time, something within the week, something on the weekend, or something that evening to look forward to. If you always have something that is personally yours to look forward to, you can deal with about anything.

My son, husband, and I, we plan a weekend trip every weekend. We are fortunate enough to live by a lot of the state parks, so we go to all of the different parks. We have a goal that every weekend we will explore something new as a family. That time is personally reenergizing.

To reduce the spillover of professional stress into their personal and family lives, exemplary performers also utilize demarcation (transition) rituals that allow them to close off their work life each day and reenter their personal lives. This can involve maintaining perspective on the relative importance of one's work in relationship to one's whole life (as noted in the three responses below).

It's also important to remind yourself that it's just a job. You can get wrapped up in somebody's problems to the point they become your problems. You have to remember that you're not a part of it and must maintain your separation if you are going to be of help.

I think the healthiest probation officers find a good balance between their professional lives and their personal lives. They're not living only for work or only taking care of themselves and their families and doing nothing at work. They can work hard and then go home and leave it behind them and focus on other people and activities.

When the day is done, you gotta leave it there.

This strategy can also involve particular transition rituals done at the end of each workday to prevent carryover of work stress into the home. Several study participants reported using their commute time home from work for such separation.

D. Limit-setting and Boundary Management—Exemplary performers achieve a high degree of productivity, but they sustain that productivity by carefully limiting their commitments. Study participants, because of their recognized productivity, had to regularly reign in their propensity to overcommit themselves in response to requests to take on additional responsibilities. The ability to manage their workload seems to have been a key to long-term performance. This group of exemplary performers also found ways to define and maintain the boundary between their personal and professional lives. The need for such boundary management generated considerable discussion.

Our church takes a bus to the treatment facility in our town and brings them to our church. I've got a large clientele at church now, and I've really had to learn how to manage that. My clients all want to come up and talk to me there. I want them to know that I'm glad to see them there, but I will not talk business with them there. I've had to learn to say, "Gimme a call on Monday and we'll talk about that."

While you're at work, you take that stuff personally and you do what you can do there. Then it's back to your family, and that's your family's time and it's not fair to them to bring

your work home to them. I don't know if it's easy for other people to do that, but I've had to learn to leave work at work.

One of the techniques that I use is to try my best not to take my work home with me. I try to leave work behind and enjoy time with myself and my family. Whether it's playing golf, reading books, or going to the movies, you have to do those things that replenish you. If you get yourself into a rut of just going home and getting up and going to work, you're gonna have a tough time staying positive at work.

E. Centering Rituals—One particular category of self-care utilized by these exemplary performers was the use of centering rituals—rituals that reaffirm one's core identity and core values (White, 1997). For some this involved the arenas of religion and spirituality.

I focus on getting totally away from the job, doing something that's completely unrelated. Right now I'm in the oblate program with the Benedictine nuns, and I get a lot of enjoyment out of spending time at the monastery. It is very peaceful and restful there and helps me deal with the stress.

I think that the spiritual aspect of a probation officer's life can help, and I'm not saying it has to be one particular religion. It may not have to be religion at all, but just having some type of spiritual element to your life helps you get through with what you have to deal with on the job.

For others these centering rituals involved finding activities that reaffirmed the existence of goodness and decency—an antidote to the confrontation with negativity and pain that is so much a part of probation work.

I really push myself to spend time with the good people in the community. If you're dealing with people who are criminals during your workday, some part of the rest of your time needs to be spent with prosocial people. I think that helps me to keep aware of the fact that most people who live in the community are decent. To keep from getting cynical and jaded, I have to do things that prove that to myself.

There's a little thing that I have done for probably the last ten years, and some people may think it's corny, but I live by it. There's this little calendar that has five things to be happy about every single day. So every single day the first thing that I do is go down and pour my coffee and look at the five things for that particular day. Some of them are pretty goofy, but there's always one out of the five that usually connects to me. I make a conscious effort to start every single day all over again with a fresh new perspective.

F. Mirroring Rituals—Mirroring rituals involve cultivating relationships that reinforce one's aspirational values and avoiding people who represent the antithesis of those values.

There are times when we're emotionally down or emotionally up, and there are some people who are constantly negative or positive. It's really important for us to recognize, and I think we do it intuitively, who's gonna suck the energy and positive stuff out of us, and who's gonna help rejuvenate us. I try to spend as much time as possible with the positive people.

I ask those who are constantly negative, “Why do you work here.” I get tired of hearing “I’m here for the benefits” or “I need to pay the bills” or whatever. You can get benefits somewhere else. I stay away from them as much as possible.

It’s hard to confront the negativity for fear of being calling a cheerleader or a Pollyanna or accused of kissing up to management. It’s easier to just surround yourself with really positive people and avoid the others.

If I’m frustrated at work with something, I seek out people—a coworker or my boss—that I feel like I can talk to about it and who can give me good feedback. So it’s not just a gripe session, but it’s a let’s-solve-the-problem session. That really helps when I can’t deal with it on my own.

The new probation officers coming in have something to teach us. When we’ve done this for a while, we can lose some of the good qualities we had when we started. New officers can get us back in touch with those qualities. Clients can also help. I’ve learned that if you really respect and listen to your clients, they will tell you what’s going on, but you have to listen.

Some participants described how they had ritualized these mutual support rituals within their offices.

If there’s somebody in our office starting to get stressed out, we take them out to lunch. Food resolves all problems. [Laughter] It’s a time to unwind and relax and talk about work or things going on at home. It’s all about working together as a whole.

G. Unpaid Acts of Service—Several participants described unpaid volunteer work outside of the probation field as a means of sustaining their health as a probation officer.

I volunteer for the local YMCA, where I teach a class for two- and three-year-olds. I find such activities rewarding for me and a break from so many negative things I see in the probation part of my life.

Performing acts of service in one’s personal life would not on the surface seem to offer a source of replenishment from high-stress service occupations. The exemplary performers we studied tended to use these activities to reinforce their identities as people who were making a positive difference in the world and to give something positive to their communities outside the framework of paid employment.

Organizational Approaches The exemplary performers in this study felt that there were several organizational strategies that could help optimize the performance and health of probation officers. Many praised efforts at health promotion that some counties and court systems had initiated, but they also emphasized the positive role of office policies (e.g., flex time), in-house training and team-building, and the quality of supervision. Ideally, they envisioned a chain of support through which they were supported in ways that allowed them to effectively monitor and support those they served. There was considerable discussion about the importance of the overall work milieu and the importance of the supervisor in enhancing health and performance. The following comments are representative.

I don't think you can expect your officers to care about the people they're dealing with if you don't care about them. We don't raise caring kids by being nasty adults, and you are not going to have an office with caring officers if supervisors don't care for them.

We've been so lucky to have a great supervisor who then became the director. I had a friend in the hospital, and he kept looking at me and saying, "What are you doing here? Your work will be here tomorrow, and you better not be. This is why we give you sick time and vacation time. We can cover for you." When you get that kind of support, you are ready to work twice as hard when you come back.

We have one officer with a son with special needs, and when he has to leave, we all are comfortable walking into court and saying, "I'm sorry, he's had to leave, can we continue this," or "I will be reporting on their behalf."

Study participants suggested that chief managing officer training that focused on how to create and sustain a positive working environment could be very helpful in elevating performance and health within particular probation departments. Other suggested ideas included formal mentorship programs for new officers and refresher courses for more tenured workers (after ten years) that focused on personal and professional development.

Discussion

This study examined stressors and stress management strategies among probation officers who have sustained high levels of professional performance and health. The stressors identified by study participants included such conditions as role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload that have been identified in earlier studies of probation officer stress (Whitehead, 1985; Lindner & Koehler, 1992; Whitehead, 1987; Whisler, 1994; Lindner & Bonn, 1996) but included a greater emphasis on the special difficulties probation officers experience in trying to achieve a separation between their professional and personal lives.

There have been two central theories about professional burnout: one attributing the source of worker distress to prolonged contact with clients (Maslach, 1982) and another arguing that the source of such distress derives more from factors in the organizational environment (Chernias, 1980). Whitehead (1985) tested these theories in the probation environment and found that most probation officer stress was rooted more in the lack of organizational support for the probation officer than in stressors the probation officer experiences in relationships with his or her clients. Our study supports Whitehead's findings. With the exception of stress related to the potential threat to public safety of a small subset of high-risk offenders, the probation officers in our study did not report client contact as the major source of their professional stress. In fact, most of our respondents cited such contact as a source of professional satisfaction. The stressors they reported experiencing most frequently and most intensely related to the organizational conditions within which those service relationships were conducted.

The strategies used by study participants to elevate and sustain their performance and health are widely recognized in the classic stress-management literature (e.g., Selye, 1974; Pelletier, 1977) but contain qualitative differences. Two examples are particularly noteworthy. There is a substantial body of literature on the use of professional mentors to enhance the health and performance of human-service workers (see Sosik & Godshalk, in press), but this particular strategy ranked fifteenth of seventeen strategies that participants were asked to rate in personal importance. Similarly, formal stress-management techniques occupy a central place in the stress management literature but ranked least important of the seventeen strategies rated by the probation officers in our study. Also noteworthy is the prominent role that relationships played in ameliorating stress. Five of the top seven strategies used by our superperformers to manage

professional stress involved drawing support from relationships outside of or within the work environment.

This study also sheds some light on the particular style of stress management that superperformers utilize to sustain their performance. When asked how they responded to being angry, depressed, frustrated, or exhausted at work, our respondents consistently described an assertive response to such feelings. Rather than project blame for these emotions, the exemplary performers examined how these feelings related to their own behavior, took personal responsibility for those feelings, and then took proactive action to change them. Given the choice to respond to stressors emotionally, cognitively, or behaviorally, the super-performers in our study exhibited a marked preference for action.

There were several limitations to this study. As a pilot study, the small number of participants precluded quantitative analysis and the identification of variance in responses by age, gender, ethnicity, tenure of experience and caseload mix. The small study-sample contained an unrepresentative proportion of Caucasian female probation officers from rural areas—a sampling bias that may have shaped the character of our findings. The study lacked a comparison group of probation officers who had experienced sustained performance problems and health problems. (Use of a comparison design was not politically or practically feasible.) The study design was also hampered by the lack of objective criteria to define exemplary performance and health. Future studies would also benefit from the inclusion of measures related to job satisfaction. While job satisfaction was not a specific focus of this study, the interaction of productivity, health, and professional satisfaction was a clear theme within the focus group and questionnaire responses—a finding that confirms earlier studies (Wright & Bonett, 1997; Wright & Cropanzano, 2000).

Notwithstanding these limitations, the study has several strengths. It is one of the first studies to use a resilience framework (versus a pathology framework) to study probation officer stress. We hope that there will be future studies of larger size and greater methodological rigor that focus on exemplary performance and health of probation officers. The study also provides one of the most in-depth descriptions in the professional literature of how probation officers sustain high levels of performance and health. There have been many studies of professional distress and its effect on health and performance. This study marks a shift from studying the problem to studying the lived solution. It is, as such, a study of stress (sustained demands for adaptational change) without distress (deterioration in personal health and professional performance). Studies that focus on the negative aspects of professional stress can mask the fact that there are professionals who thrive in these very conditions. We have tried to open a window of understanding into such professional resilience.

Recommendations for Follow-up

We would offer the following recommendations as potential follow-up activities to this study:

1. Distribute a copy of this study to the chief managing officers of all probation departments in the state of Illinois.
2. Explore the possibility of conducting a larger survey of exemplary performance and health of Illinois probation officers, utilizing quantitative measures of the performance and health and quantitative measures of strategies linked to these conditions.
3. Integrate the findings of this study into the orientation of new probation officers in the state of Illinois.
4. Conduct two workshops in Illinois for CMOs and their leadership teams on enhancing exemplary performance and professional health in probation services.

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Appendix A

Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts Focus Groups on Self-care Patterns among Probation Officers Supervising High-Risk DUI Offenders Participant Information Sheet

What do you like most about being a PO?

What do you like least about being a PO?

How would you describe your personal philosophy of probation work?

What core values guide your work as a probation officer?

What activities do you do on a regular basis at work to sustain a positive approach to your work?

What activities do you do on a regular basis outside of work to sustain a positive approach to your work?

Briefly describe what you do in response to the following:

When I am frustrated at work, I . . .

When I am angry at work, I . . .

When I am sad or depressed at work, I . . .

When I feel professionally exhausted or stagnant, I . . .

When I'm disappointed by the failure of someone I'm supervising, I . . .

Rate each of the following on the positive influence they have exerted on your performance as a probation officer.

1 = not important

2 = important

3 = very important

___ Attending professional training

___ Having alone-time rituals that keep me focused (e.g., self-reflection, meditation, prayer, or reading that is informative and motivational)

___ Daily goal-setting and/or self-evaluation at end of day

___ Cultivating relationships with other POs who have a positive attitude

___ Maintaining relationships with POs who work in other offices

___ Maintaining relationships with professional peers who work outside the criminal justice system

___ Having one or more professional mentors

___ Having one or more close relationships at work in which I can express emotions related to my work experience

- ___ Having one or more close friendships away from work in which I can express emotions related to my work experience
- ___ Having healthy intimate and family relationships
- ___ Having enjoyable hobbies/leisure activities
- ___ Avoiding or self-monitoring potentially harmful approaches to stress management (e.g., smoking, drinking, risk-taking, cynicism, and negativity)
- ___ Getting regular exercise
- ___ Physical self-care (e.g., healthy diet, regular physical checkups)
- ___ Using particular stress-management techniques (e.g., biofeedback, meditation, progressive relaxation)
- ___ Cultivating a sense of humor
- ___ Healthy intimate/family relationships
- ___ Doing volunteer work unrelated to my job