

# Three Mental Health Exercises That Help Officers Manage *Stress and Avoid Burnout*

# Introduction

## Law enforcement professionals today face significant challenges.

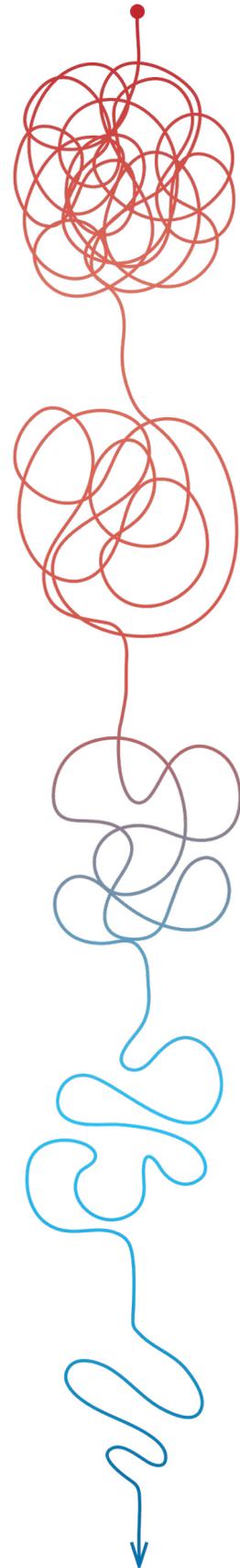
In addition to the everyday stresses of the job, officers face mass media coverage that focuses on negative incidents instead of the thousands of positive interactions happening daily between police and communities. The resulting social and political discourse hasn't been kind to the brave officers who continue to suit up and put themselves on the line.

In addition to the inherent threats of law enforcement, elevated stress, and increased public scrutiny, officers face personal challenges with families, relationships, peers, and more. These stressors don't disappear with time, and suppressing them isn't an effective long-term strategy.

***law enforcement officers are 54% more likely to die of suicide than the civilian population***

According to a 2020 survey study, conditions such as **post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression were estimated to affect police officers at rates between 7% and 35%**. A more alarming study revealed **law enforcement officers are 54% more likely to die of suicide than the civilian population**.

The following research-backed tools can help avoid negative outcomes and assist officers in leading healthy and productive lives.



## Chapter 1

# What is Cognitive Behavior Therapy?

***Mental health intervention, such as therapy or psychiatric management, increases the ability of officers to maintain optimal mental health and sustain productive careers.***

The goal is to help officers process trauma, work through daily challenges, and obtain tools to use on their own time. Tools that allow them to help themselves. Tools are defined here as a skill set the client can implement to improve the quality of cognitive functioning, emotional health, and behavior management.

**One of the most effective options at your disposal is Cognitive Behavior Therapy.** Cognitive Behavior Therapy, commonly known as CBT, is an evidence-based practice clinically shown to benefit anxiety, depression, trauma, substance abuse, and eating disorders, amongst other things. It's simple, powerful, and can provide hugely beneficial results.

The main principle of CBT is to increase a client's awareness of the connection between their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Once an individual understands they have the ability to control and manage their thoughts, they can begin to improve the quality of their emotional health and behavior.

### **It's an empowering process.**

Instead of letting outside forces influence how they feel, they're able to regain a sense of control. For those serving in law enforcement, who repeatedly face trauma and distressing incidents, this is a beneficial skill to develop and a critical part of a self-care program.



## Chapter 2

# Introduction to Common CBT Exercises

***There are three main focus points when introducing clients to CBT for the first time.***

- ✓ A simple image called the CBT triangle that shows the connection between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.
- ✓ A set of three rational questions.
- ✓ A grounding technique invoking the five senses that brings clients back to the present moment and out of their destructive thoughts.



### The Cognitive Triangle

**The CBT triangle is a simple image that helps clients understand the connection between their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.**

This simple image, with thoughts at the top, feelings at the bottom right, and behaviors at the bottom left, helps clients visualize where they are in the process and how each point influences the next.

**Our negative thoughts can often be irrational and not based on facts.** CBT helps individuals take control of their thoughts and increases the outcome of logical, rational, and positive thinking.

For law enforcement professionals forced to confront heightened challenges and trauma on a regular basis, the ability to take control can help alleviate stress and avoid burnout.

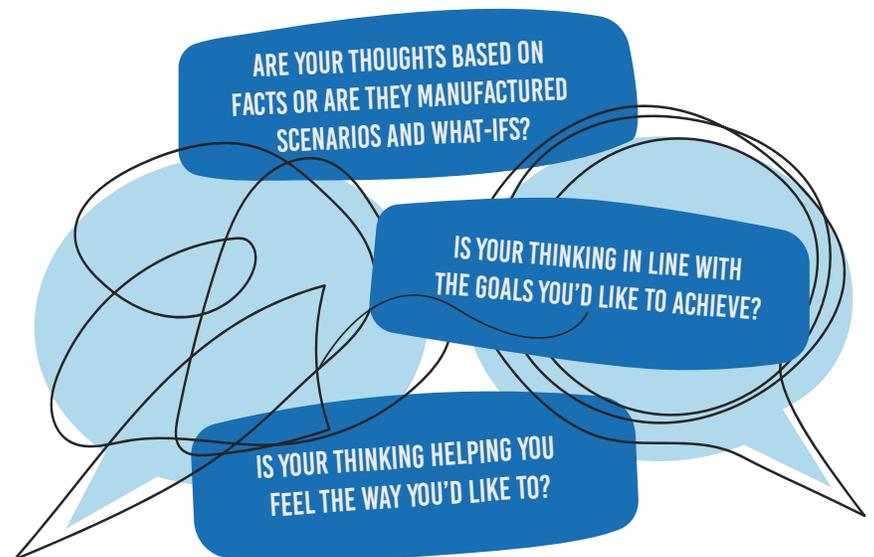
**After introducing the CBT triangle, three rational questions are presented.**

The first question helps clients realize if their thoughts are based on facts, or if they're simply manufactured scenarios and what-ifs. The second question asks the client if their thinking is in line with the goals they'd like to achieve. The third question asks a client if their thinking is helping them feel the way they'd like to.

These questions are designed to put the power back in their hands and clearly demonstrate they have a choice in deciding how they'd like to feel.

Answering these questions can help law enforcement officers separate themselves from the stresses of the job and get necessary mental breaks. The realization that their own thinking can cause tremendous undue stress helps them become empowered to take control and change it.

People that repeatedly face critical incidents and constant danger become particularly susceptible to panic attacks and negative flashbacks. Without the right tools, these can become negative habits that lead to burnout, critical incidents, or suicide. The CBT grounding technique is designed to give individuals the ability to return to the present moment and break negative thought patterns.



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**THINGS YOU CAN SEE**



The CBT grounding technique is a series of short, simple exercises that evoke all five senses. Connecting to each of the five senses forces your attention to shift away from negative thoughts that cause anxiety and instead bring the focus back to the present moment. It's an extremely effective way to separate from distress.

4

**THINGS YOU CAN TOUCH**



Clinical studies reveal that a person's ability to remain in the present moment is connected to various health benefits. These include lower levels of perceived stress, a decrease in anxiety and depression, improved mood, and improved well-being. The CBT grounding technique can be utilized in moments of significant stress, but the practice of being aware is something that will benefit practitioners in all areas of their lives, not just critical moments.

3

**THINGS YOU CAN HEAR**



2

**THINGS YOU CAN SMELL**



1

**THINGS YOU CAN TASTE**



## Chapter 3

# Benefits for Individuals and Communities

***The health and safety of our communities are directly related to the health and wellness of our law enforcement officers.***

Officers are asked to face tremendous challenges daily, and empowering them with tools to take a more active role in their well-being gives them the best chance of maintaining healthy and productive lives and careers.

These tools don't have to be complicated to be effective. A simple conversation offering a brief education on what it means to be well, and the available tools to achieve wellness, is more than enough to get started. With tools like CBT, officers can use simple and effective ways to increase calm, decrease stress, and provide relief that will benefit not only them but the communities they serve.



**By Zoey Kyriacou, MA, LAC, NCC**

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