

CHAPTER ONE



WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF DISPATCHING

As a dispatcher you would have to admit that sometimes you love this job and sometimes you hate it, but if you stay with it for more than a few years like I did, it's probably because you love it more than hate it.

Also if you are like me it is probably the excitement that drew you to the job in the first place and it is the excitement that keeps you doing it day after day, year after year. Call it the "rush", the "thrill", or just excitement, whatever you name it; it keeps you coming back for more every day.

At least that is what it was like for me, because I'm every bit of the "Adrenaline Junky" and I really craved the excitement I found in the job especially when the calls got really "hot"!

Yeah, there is something really great about the rush of handling a really good pursuit, or a bank robbery in progress, or other critical call, isn't there?

Yes all those “high-gear” calls can be a rush, but just as well the pressure to handle them correctly can really be very stressful as well because the margin of error is low in dispatching – REAL low. Make an error in an address, or you don’t get all the information and it can have some dire consequences. You know that because “getting it right” was taught to you from day one. You know that you have to “watch it” and get it right the first time.

This isn’t unusual because have to do well and try not to make mistakes in all jobs. But not too many jobs compare to the level of “error free” performance that comes with 911 dispatching, where day in and day out you have to give your all so that the officers and the public you serve are protected.

But if performing your job nearly flawlessly wasn’t enough pressure, there are also all those problems you can have with the people you work with. Interpersonal issues like: the in-fighting, name calling, back biting, gossip, that happen in all dispatch centers in one degree or another. In fact “interpersonal issues” is a very significant stressor in Dispatching.

Can’t We All Just Get Along?

Unless you work in a small center alone, you usually work with one, maybe a few more people, in close quarters, forty-plus hours a week, in a segregated, often times isolated environment. Getting along with those you work with can be a real challenge sometimes I know. You have all the little “cliques” and such. Yet you know that in the interest of officer safety and just plain old good order you have to try to get along. More on that later.

Now when you combine all the factors I've mentioned above along with the interpersonal issues then you can see why dispatching is one of the most stressful jobs there is. It can get real crazy at times.

For instance, when you do make a mistake you know you are going to get hammered by the boss – that's a gimme. But let's say when your co-workers are also involved then the "finger pointing" and "blame-gaming" begins; now it can get even more stressful.



For example, let's say the Supervisor walks into dispatch. There are three of you on shift and the Supervisor notices that the "always must be secured" access door is unsecured. You might see this scenario unfold:

Supervisor: *"Who left the outside door unsecured?"* (In a loud accusing voice)

Dispatcher One: *"I didn't!"*

Dispatcher Two: *"Don't ask me, I've been on the radio!"*

Dispatcher Three: *"I wasn't the last one in!"*

Get the picture? Yeah, when there are two or more involved, it's "Blame/Denial City". It doesn't always happen. Sometimes one will step forward and lie on the sword, take the blame, own up to the error.

O' thou brave and honest soul!

But in REALITY, you usually get the “I didn’t do it, don’t look at me!” response.

Now this behavior has a simple cause. It’s called fear. The fear that comes from not wanting to get yelled at and getting into trouble. I don’t blame them, I don’t like getting in trouble; you can ask anybody that knows me. I’m a real weasel too.

(But I’m working to improve!)

In the same situation if you were by yourself when this happened, well, “Your it”! Unless you can blame it on ghosts or something. Otherwise, you really don’t have a choice.

Of course this is silly behavior, but we’ve all been there and done that.

Again, when you combine this with the “normal” stressors such as long hours, inadequate pay, low status, etc., it can make your day in dispatch a miserable existence. True, you may have these factors in any job, but they are more concentrated specifically because of the “close quarters” you find in a typical dispatcher center.

UNIQUELY STRESSFUL

In a later chapter I will explain further about all the specific dispatch stressors, but for now let look more at the uniqueness of working in Dispatch.

All jobs have stress, and some jobs – like 911 dispatching have more than the normal amount of it. In fact, 911 dispatching is comparable with the stress that Police Officers face, howbeit in a different way. It is also comparable to the stress that Air Traffic Controllers and even soldiers under combat conditions experience. More exactly, it's comparable with a particular **KIND** of stress that is common with all these high-stress occupations. That kind of stress is a “sustained stress”, or what I call:

“The Ready Alert Status”

The Ready Alert Status refers to the *constant internal pressure* that affects you even when nothing is going on. For instance, you could be sitting at the console on a Sunday morning, with nothing really going on, reading the newspaper and yet your “antenna” is tuned. Your “Radar” is UP for that next 9-1-1 call, or Officer call on the radio. In fact you are always ready for anything even when it would appear that it isn't necessarily busy at the moment. There is always the *anticipation* that at anytime something can go down. You can sense it; you can feel it.

Why is this? Because over time and through experience you have become “conditioned to respond” to just about anything that comes at you on the job. This is due in large part to your early training days, when everything you learned seem to be thrown at you at once.

I know you remember how when you were getting started in dispatch and going through your training it sometimes felt like your head was just going to explode with all the information that was coming at you? You might have wondered at the time if you were ever going to “get it”.

I'm sure too you can remember the kind and soothing words of your trainer as he or she gently coached you along with soothing words to guide your training.

"Get that Line!!! Don't just let it ring!"

"Get that Teletype!!"

"Did you get that entry in yet??"

"Finish that call quickly, you have another on hold!!"

"Come on! Move faster, you are moving too slow!!!"

"Hurry, Hurry!!!"

(Phew...that brought back a few flashbacks!)

Well, at least it didn't last forever, and after a while you learned how to "get it down"; how to multitask and prioritize and speed up your responses, and as time went on it got easier to "keep up". After a while you even remembered to do things without being reminded about them – well, sometimes anyway.

So while all the training was taking place, even though you didn't know it at the time, you were being "conditioned" to respond quickly, accurately, and without hesitation. In fact, you might not know this, but that is the reason for the quick-paced training. It is, or should be designed to condition you and make you react quickly to your surroundings, so all that yelling and pushing and prodding had a purpose.

So now even though you might not feel it or even be aware of being in a Alert Status, your mind is aware of it because it is ingrained in your subconscious memory, and as it is said, "Where the mind goes, the body follows."

So that when the phone rings it works like a “trigger” and so you “jump” as soon as it rings. Or when an officer calls on the radio and no matter what you might be doing you respond, almost automatically.

Through training and time you have become programmed to act according to demand! - This is important to understand!

This programming or conditioning can have some funny side effects too. For instance, have you ever had the experience of answering the phone while at home with this response, “9-1-1, Do you have an emergency?” I did that a few times. It’s embarrassing. One time it was a family member calling, who after hearing that told me to take a vacation!

You might even notice that when the phone rings at all, anywhere at all it kind of jolts you a little! Overall you might have noticed that your reactions get quicker and you are more alert to your surroundings.

Give thanks to the Alert Status.

AFTER A WHILE ABNORMAL FEELS NORMAL

But it also comes to you at a price. Because the constant “alertness”, if it isn’t countered by good and sound principles of stress management, can wear you down after a while. The fact is that it can be helpful and keep you on your toes WHILE YOU ARE ON THE JOB, but you have to “come down” once in a while and that is the trick: To learn how to do that. If you don’t you could easily burnout.

**YEAH, DISPATCHING IS STRESSFUL, BUT I GET BY ALL
RIGHT...**

I know that telling you that dispatching is stressful is nothing you don't know. Yet there are some of you who may feel that the stress doesn't affect you all that much. After all you work the job everyday, and depending on how long you have been at it perhaps you have learned to cope to a certain extent with the stress you experience.

I would almost believe it except that I am very perceptive during my classes and meetings with dispatchers. Those who have attended will tell you that I like to "scope them out", see how they are feeling. That's why I take little surveys during the class, asking them "designed" (not trick) questions, in order to gauge where they are. Not surprisingly most of the times it's the senior people in a class that tell me - even before we begin, "I don't know why I'm in this class I get by just fine!"

Now if you are in this group I'm not there to tell you that you are stressed out or not, that is for you to decide. On the other hand I've had a lot of experience counseling people for stress and other issues, and after a while you learn to "read between the lines on faces". Often I can also see the bitterness, resentment, and anger in them and quite frankly, that doesn't come from "handling it". It comes from stress, a lot of it, and like it or not we all have issues with dealing with stress. So there isn't any reason for the denial. We can all learn SOMETHING that can help us deal with it better.

On the other hand you may be someone who has had trouble coping with the stress on the job, and you know it. Maybe you have had a critical incident and afterward experienced some of the physical and

mental symptoms that can be associated with it and wondered if you were going crazy or something worse.

Or maybe you handled a violent domestic call or a suicide and years later –after initially thinking it didn’t affect you too much – you are experiencing disruptive sleep patterns, headaches, depression, flash backs and other symptoms of chronic or cumulative stress.

Or perhaps you haven’t told anyone about the problems you have been having because you don’t want to appear weak or as someone who can’t “handle it”. So “bucking up” you “go along with the flow” and continue on. You don’t complain, or voice your concerns. You just take it and do your best to deal with it.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KNOWING AND DOING

There is a real difference between knowing about the stress of dispatching and then knowing how to effectively cope with it. Just as there is really a right way and a wrong way to do everything, there is a right way and a wrong way to cope with stress. You can know all about the stress of dispatching but still not know about how to properly deal with it.

Now that is not your fault because with all the training you normally receive you don’t usually get any training on how to deal with the stress you experience – unless you attend a special training class like “Stress and the Dispatcher”, or some other such class. Or perhaps you read this book or some other material on the subject.

You might think you are coping with it just fine, but it isn't THAT you cope but **HOW** you cope that is the point. You can cope "rightly" and you can cope "wrongly" and the difference between the two is the possibility of ending up in a state of being that is worse than the cause.

So if coping for you means you get drunk after every shift (I have been told that more than a few times) and then tell me, "That helps me cope!" then I'll ask this question, "Is it really the best way? I think you would agree that there is at least the possibility that there is a better way. At least a less expensive and destructive way.

Then again maybe you don't drink, but you use another kind of coping mechanism that may feel like it is helpful but is in reality what I will refer to later as a **Negative Coping Tool**. It might be aggression where you lash out at people because they get on your "last nerve". You might even throw something like a Stapler at someone. Yeah it might make you feel better, but I think it's going to cause other problems, call me psychic, but I've got a feeling it isn't going to go over well for the "receiver" of your aggression.

Or you might withdraw from conflicting and stressful situations by holding in your feelings and keeping them to yourself. But that also can cause other problems because stress won't let you do that for long without consequences.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO COPE "MY WAY"

As I said in the introduction, during the years I dispatched I developed my own way of coping with the stress. Some of my methods I used for myself I thought worked pretty good and some of them, well,

they were not so good. One thing for sure, I learned what was effective and what was not in relation to what helped me to cope. *I definitely learned that the “Throwing the Stapler” trick didn’t work!*

However it really wasn’t until after my career at the console that I really began to study the subject of stress in depth, and through it I learned some really good coping tools I wish I’d had known back then.

I also learned from personal experience (a heart attack is real personal) that stress is a serious subject with serious consequences if you don’t learn how to deal with it. So I’m going to emphasize this over and over:

“Stress can’t be denied or glossed over and ignored, or played with. Either you learn how to deal with it or it will, in the end deal with you, as it did with me!”

True, some of us are affected more than others and I’ll explain why that is true a little bit later on. The point to understand for now is that stress affects everyone in SOME degree. So developing a stress program that is sound, based on the facts can only help you.

THE BEST STRESS PROGRAM IS A PERSONAL PLAN!

Sometimes we resent someone telling us to “get it together”, that is just human nature. We are all to a certain extent naturally rebellious. I know that, which is why I’m not going to try to tell you WHAT YOU SHOULD DO, because I know it won’t work. You won’t stick to it.

No, if you are going to have a stress program that works it is best to take what you learn and fashion it in a way that you can adapt to yourself. It's like a diet or exercise program. If you really want to stick with it you are going to have to PERSONALIZE IT.

Ultimately, there is nothing like creating your own personalized program of stress management. When you make it your own you are more likely to stick with it.

This is simply human nature and very native to dispatchers. Again, it is part of our nature as dispatchers. We are self-doers, self-starters, go-getters, even if we aren't the boss. This assertiveness of the main characteristics we have that allows us to succeed in the profession.

So when we get the facts and learn about stress and how it affects us, we can take charge and develop our own program and then feel as though we are in control of our own program. Then we are more likely to keep at it for life.

I have found in my near half-century of living life that if you try to take what someone else says and then try to mimic in your life it usually doesn't work out. You can see this is true in something as simple as going on a diet.

Have you ever seen those diet commercials where you see some really skinny person on an infomercial saying, "Just eat this way / take this pill/ use this machine/ and you'll lose weight"? They can make it sound so easy can't they? Of course they have all those 'testimonials' and everybody is shown crying tears of joy at their "phenomenal" weight loss.

It just makes you pick up the phone and whip out that Visa! But hold on for just a second.

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Let me ask you the obvious question, “How many diets have you been on?” One? Five? Ten? Two hundred?



“On the Computer Diet, you can snack as much as you want. You burn off the calories by yelling at the tech support people and banging your head in frustration.”

Did they work for you?

Did you match the results shown?

If so, did you stay on it for a long period of time? Or did you “slip back”?

Now I’m speaking from personal experience. I have found that those diets don’t work so well at all. I never did stick with any of them, and yes I tried them all. Got the library of books and tapes to prove it! Oh, there was a little success here and there. I would lose a little weight in the beginning, but soon or latter I was back to my “sinful” ways.

The sad part was that most of the weight I gained in the beginning of my career by consuming all those nutritious foods we dispatchers know and love. You know, the ones from the:

“The Dispatcher’s Five Basic Food Groups”.

You know what they are don’t you? If not, here they are!

McDonalds – *“Big Mac Attack Heaven! Super size those fries!”*

Burger King – *“Double Whopper with Double Cheese Please!”*

Dominoes – *“Little bit of everything will do!”*

Dunkin Donuts – *“What can I say?”*

Dairy Queen - “*Blizzards Anyone?*”

Ok, so no wonder I was having trouble keeping off the pounds!

However, the real change for me began one year, when on the day after the Annual Department photos were taken and I saw mine I was HORRIFIED! To make it worse, they took it while I was munching on a donut! (*It was chocolate covered with sprinkles....mmmmm!*)

I knew right then I had to get those pounds off. So I tried this diet and that diet, this fad and that fad. Boy I tried everything but nothing worked! I crunched, I jogged, I climb mountains (well not real mountains). Yet after a while I got a little discouraged, gave up, and just went back to eating like before.

I just couldn't get used to the schedules and the food. But more to the truth - I didn't really want to! Again, that darn rebelliousness in action!

But what else could I do? I tried everything and it didn't work. But I still knew that what I doing wasn't healthy and while I didn't want to go through the rigorous regimen of eating low fat, no fat, no taste, no fun, yet I knew I had to do something.

Then it dawned on me that I might just take a little information here and little there, and develop something that worked for me. Well what do you know, it worked! It didn't happen overnight of course, but then *habits that are worth keeping for life take time to develop!*

I call the diet I'm on now, the "*Atkins-Zone-South Beach-Mediterranean Diet*". That's because all I did was simply take a little from all these different diets that I had tried before, found the parts that worked for me, that I could enjoy and stick with, then added some things I picked up along the way and added a little exercise and viola! I lost the weight! I'm now forty-seven and I can still see my feet – not bad for an old guy eh? I've been the same 165lbs for ten years now, and on occasion I've been known to still stop into Dunkin Donuts!

Ok, thanks for keeping with me through memory lane. But the point of this story is that's exactly what I would like you to with all the information about stress I am going to give you in this book. Just simply take what you will read here and add what you already know and "invent" a system of stress management that works just for you. It's that simple. The fact is that there is a greater chance that you will remember and stick with a program that is personalized, than if you just tried to copy someone else's.

That is really what I hope to accomplish here. I'm going to present to you the causes of stress found in dispatching and then give you a lot of advice on how best to cope with them – remember, 'advice' NOT commands. So take what I give you and then adopt the parts that work for you. You might not agree with all my position or conclusions, and that's OK too. You don't have to. I'm not the fountain of all wisdom, I'm still learning too.

The point is that I would like you to keep an open mind, even if you believe you don't have a problem. That's why I offered this book for free. I'm not in this for the money. I want to help you to cope. On keeping that open mind I'll close this chapter with this piece of valuable

advice. It's good advice that can be applied to anything in life, but really fits what we have been talking about.

You see most of the pain and suffering we go through in life is because of our "resistance to change". When change comes, it makes us nervous and uncomfortable. Sometimes WE have to change. Not because we are stupid and wrong, but because change can help us be better people and to grow.

Plus like it or not, **change is inevitable in life.**

Yet it doesn't have to be, and usually isn't a negative. Most times change is positive, so don't fear it or runaway from it. Embrace it! I know that you might have done things the same way for years. You might have viewed life the same way and have had the same beliefs too for years. But if you need to change your view of life and your beliefs to better cope with stress then you owe yourself the opportunity to do it.

So hang on, we're going on a journey and you might just learn something from it all.

Now for the advice I promised. It came from a very old friend of mine who went through more than his share of setbacks and heartaches. Here it is:

"When it comes to life, eat the hay, and spit out the sticks!"

Oh, and one more thing, along the way I do hope to give you more hay than sticks!