

THE NATURE AND CHARACTER OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CRISIS IN THE ASPECT OF POLICE ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

The text is devoted to the subject of an emergency, or crisis, situation in a psychological context. There are described the concepts of stress, stressful situation, crisis and crisis situation. By discussing in detail the areas of impact of strong emotions on people, the author tries to expose tools and recommended ways of reacting to such situations through police actions.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: 31.05.2018 Accepted 16.06.2018

Key words

stress, crisis situation, police actions

It is difficult to define the concept of an emergency, a crisis or a crisis situation and it is necessary to specify strict assumptions about the scope of impact of the listed states in which an entity may function. It is not possible, on the basis of theoretical considerations, to assign these concepts to all areas of life. Moreover, the type and size of the entity that is a participant in the above situations will decide about giving the concept a specific meaning and filling it with content. The social or political face of the crisis will have different characteristics than the one that affects an individual – a human in the psychological dimension. There will also be another area of crises that the Police are interested in by their competence, and in which

they can undertake measurable actions aimed at restoring the state of equilibrium. In view of such complexity of the concepts in question, there is only the possibility of a general semantic interpretation, which will require further supplementation with the appropriate typology and specification of the subjective and objective ranges.

Considerations on the psychological crisis should begin with defining the concept of stress, i.e. a phenomenon that constantly accompanies people, causing negative or positive effects in the state of their functioning, not only in the psychological dimension. Stress is a normal human reaction to what is new, unusual, difficult, threatening or exceptionally pleasant¹, to moments associated with extraordinary feelings that are the result of experiencing unusual events. This response of the human body to the situation or tasks posed to it is a derivative of typically biological shields created by the nervous system. The state of stress causes the body to perform better and enables an increased mental or physical effort. The multiplied blood circulation rate causes a strong influx of oxygen to the human body and selected hormones that provide the body with necessary energy components to fight off unusual situations. The use of these additional resources may result in different reactions and, as a consequence, lead to an increase in the possibility of an effective response against, for example, an imminent threat or it may overpower a person due to lack of the ability to control such a state of their own body. In addition, troublesome and too long functioning of the body in a state of stress can cause its physical and mental weakness. Each mobilization of the organism in the circumstances of the appearance of an extraordinary stimulus (stressor) causes the depletion of individual resources and may result in a decrease in emotional or motor performance, and also lead to a weakening of the immune system.

There are three basic types of understanding the phenomenon of stress:

1. Stress as a **stimulus**:

- stress = difficult situation (*I have a lot of stress at work*),
- a change in the environment that causes a high degree of emotional tension and disturbs normal functioning,

¹ A. Mackiewicz, A. Horsztyńska, M. Michalska, *Interwencja psychologiczna wobec osób po wydarzeniach traumatycznych*, [in:] *Podstawy interwencji kryzysowej – poradnik metodyczny dla psychologów*, Departament Wychowania i Promocji Obronności MON, Warsaw 2009, p. 11.

– an argument against this theory is that individual differences between people mean that the same situation can cause different reactions among different people. Even though it is assumed to call a stimulus that causes stress – a stressor, treating stress in terms of a stimulus seems unjustified.

2. Stress as a **reaction**:

- stress = tension (*stressed with work*),
- stress as an unpleasant emotional reaction, usually anxious, i.e. internal discomfort,
- an argument against – stress can be caused also by internal situations associated, for example, with the body's functioning (high temperature).

3. Stress as a **relation**:

- stress = stimulus – object – reaction,
- it is a theory of modern psychology in which stress is defined as being located between an individual and the environment, touching the relationship between them,
- is defined as disruption or announcement of disturbing the balance between the resources or capabilities of an individual and the requirements of the environment².

Regardless of the ways of understanding the phenomenon of stress, it causes specific reactions of a physical or psychological nature. Their severity will depend on typically individual characteristics of a person and ambient factors that can reduce or increase the impact of individual stressors.

Stress situations may arise in response to various breakthrough or just unusual events in a person's life. They may bring in positive or negative consequences for a given person and appear at different ages and life circumstances. These universal and at the same time significant moments are called critical life events.

Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe, psychiatrists from the University of Seattle, are the authors of the scale of critical life events. The results of their research were published in 1967 and they concerned the ranking of 43 life events, according to how much effort each of them requires to adapt. In this way, the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS) was developed in the literature. It is based on assigning a specific crisis charge to each of the listed life events. It shows that both events burdened

² J. Konieczny, H. Wawrzynowicz, J. Mydlarska, *Psychologia bezpieczeństwa*, Poznań 2011, p. 86.

with a negative emotional and positive load can cause a state of imbalance and consequently cause stress or crisis³.

TABLE 1. BODY REACTIONS TO STRESS

<p>Physiological reactions: Increased activity of the nervous system Increased adrenaline level (or noradrenaline) in the blood Heart palpitations, increase in pressure Headache, back pain, stomach ache Muscle tension</p>	<p>Changes in behavior: Overeating Smoking Alcohol and drug abuse Nail biting Sleep disorders Loosing temper easily Avoiding contact with people</p>
<p>Psychological reactions: Fear Depressive states Delusional states States of confusion and delirium Sadness Irritation Disappointment with life and oneself Defense mechanisms</p>	<p>Changes in thinking: Difficulty with concentration Forgetfulness Negative thinking</p>

Source: own study based on: J. Konieczny, H. Wawrzynowicz, J. Mydlarska, *Psychologia...*, p. 43.

TABLE 2. THE SCALE OF STRESSFUL LIFE EVENTS ACCORDING TO HOLMES AND RAHE

Stressful life event	Life Crisis Units
1. Death of a spouse	100
2. Divorce	73
3. Separation	65
4. Penal punishment	63
5. Death of a close family member	63
6. Personal illness or injury	53

³ Ibidem, p. 45.

Stressful life event	Life Crisis Units
7. Marriage	50
8. Loss of work	47
9. Reconciling with a spouse	45
10. Retirement	45
11. Change in the health status of a family member	44
12. Pregnancy	40
13. Sexual problems	39
14. Appearance of a new family member	39
15. Enterprise reorganization	39
16. Change in finances	28
17. Death of a close friend	37
18. Changing the direction of work	36
19. Changing the frequency of arguing with a spouse	35
20. High credit	31
21. Deprivation of the right to a credit or a loan	30
22. Changing duties at work	29
23. A son or daughter leaves the house	29
24. Troubles with mother-in-law	29
25. Outstanding personal achievements	28
26. The wife begins or stops working	26
27. Starting or finishing school education	26
28. Change of living conditions	25
29. Change of personal habits	24
30. Trouble with the boss	23
31. Change of hours or working conditions	20
32. Change of place of residence	20
33. Change of school	20
34. Changing entertainment	19
35. Change in religious activity	19
36. Changing social activity	18
37. A small loan	17
38. Change of sleep habits	16

Stressful life event	Life Crisis Units
39. Change in the number of family members gathering together	15
40. Changing eating habits	15
41. Holiday	13
42. Christmas	12
43. Minor infringement of law	11

Source: own study based on: J. Konieczny, H. Wawrzynowicz, J. Mydlarska, *Psychologia...*, p. 45–46.

Another conclusion derived from this study is that the accumulation of many crisis events in a short time increases the probability of the incidence of somatic diseases and at the same time reduces the physical and mental resistance of the body. According to the researchers, the probability of disease depending on the number of points scored during the year on the Life Event Scale is as follows:

- 300 points – 80%,
- 200–299 – 50%,
- 150–199 – 33%.

In the scientific community, however, the opinion prevails that the above scale is inadequate to the nature of the stress or crisis itself, since it does not take into account their interactive nature. The value of stress intensity depends not only on the crisis event itself, but also on important factors on the part of an individual, such as, for example, personality traits or family support. Therefore, particular events cannot be unambiguously assigned the values, and their potential impact on every human being should not be treated equally. However, the concept developed can serve as a preliminary assessment of the severity of circumstances conducive to the development of negative feelings among the people affected. The occurrence of several stressful events at the same time or at short intervals can cause the build-up of stress and turn into a psychological crisis.

A psychological crisis is a state of mental imbalance, which appears as a consequence of incentives assessed as too difficult to cope with them. It is associated with a temporary depletion of own resources helping to meet requirements of the environment. It is a moment in the life of an individual in which individually known and effective ways of functioning fail. A person in a crisis does not know how to proceed and often takes action

intuitively or under the influence of certain stimuli. This is accompanied by a high level of emotion and a victim of the crisis more easily and more often falls into critical emotional states (giving up, crying, indifference)⁴.

The basic features of the psychological crisis include, among others:

- turning and breakthrough character,
- high emotional tension experienced,
- fear of losing control,
- horror and a sense of helplessness,
- disorganization of behavior,
- somatic symptoms,
- mental balance disorder,
- the sense of exhaustion of individual overcoming resources difficulties,
- need for outside help.

The crisis is most often not a state that is a direct reaction to a sudden extraordinary event, and is the result of a stressful situation caused by many factors for a long time. It is the result of constant stress and tension, which can be additionally overlapped by critical events. Depending on the resilience of an individual and his/her own defense resources, the degree and duration of the crisis may be different. In addition, it is necessary to add personality traits, experience, living conditions, relationships and other elements that will influence the level of disorder in normal mental functioning and at the same time create opportunities for a faster and more effective end of a crisis situation⁵.

According to Lindemann and Caplan, the occurrence and development of the crisis is the result of a significant decline in mental resilience, which in turn results from the exhaustion, blockage or ineffectiveness of existing strategies of coping with a threat. The crisis is a reaction of a healthy person, previously well-adapted to functioning in the environment, a difficult, critical situation, usually unprecedented, sudden, unpredictable, exceeding the ordinary human experience, to which the existing resources and problem-solving skills are insufficient⁶.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 43.

⁵ M. Netczuk-Gwoździewicz, *Negocjacje w sytuacjach kryzysowych*, Wrocław 2014, p. 15.

⁶ L.J. Greenstone, S.C. Leviton, *Interwencja kryzysowa*, Gdańsk 2004, p. 15, after: M. Netczuk-Gwoździewicz, *Negocjacje...*, p. 16.

The crisis affects the body in a variety of ways and manifests itself on several levels:

- emotional – causing increased anxiety, feelings of emotional shock, feelings of loss and emptiness, anger, harm, guilt, shame or embarrassment. A person has difficulties in controlling own emotions, which may have a completely individual dimension and characteristic for a chosen person or typical for a selected population: a feeling of horror, fear of losing control, inability to concentrate on a task or thing, an overwhelming sense of helplessness and hopelessness,
- bio-physiological – these are somatic and physiological symptoms associated with anxiety in the form of excessive sweating, frequent urination, diarrhea, nausea, tachycardia, headache, abdominal pain, chest, rash, menstrual failure, lack of interest in sex or insomnia,
- cognitive – confusion, narrowing of attention, impairment or breakdown of the usual ability to solve problems and make decisions,
- behavioral – inability to continue activity and any activity, difficulties in performing normal life functions, fear of people resulting in distancing from them or reverse situation consisting in fear of loneliness, taking impulsive, ill-conceived and self-destructive activities, problems in using the available help⁷.

Lawrence M. Brammer proposed a division of emotional crises from the perspective of practical intervention actions. He divided these states into normal developmental crises, situational crises and existential crises. Taking into account the assumptions of the theory of ecosystems, there is also a separate type of catastrophic or, in other words, environmental crises⁸.

Developmental crises are associated with the progressive time in human life and the transition of an individual through subsequent stages in biological development and co-occurring changes in personal and social life, which in turn translate into changes in the emotional, intellectual and moral sphere. The most well-known among them are middle-age crises and the adolescence crisis. Situational crises are a response to some external events of a personal nature (for example, material, health, interpersonal problems) or socio-cultural (for example, armed conflicts, uprisings).

⁷ W. Łosiak, *Natura stresu. Spojrzenie z perspektywy ewolucyjnej*, Kraków 2007, p. 89, after: M. Netczuk-Gwoździewicz, *Negocjacje...*, p. 20.

⁸ L. M. Brammer, *Kontakty służące pomaganiu. Studium Pomocy Psychologicznej PTP*, Warsaw 1984, p. 45, after: M. Netczuk-Gwoździewicz, *Negocjacje...*, p. 20.

A separate category addresses crises affecting people experiencing the effects of natural phenomena, such as earthquakes, fires or other catastrophes. They are caused by environmental factors and due to the potentially strong impact they can have serious consequences for an individual or entire populations at risk. Existential crises accompany the emerging fears about the sense of life and existence in the individual or general dimension, appearing at times of key events or decisions. The escalating emptiness can take the form of serious disturbances in the functioning of the human mental sphere and cause further effects in other areas of a person's life⁹.

From the above-presented theories, it appears that a psychological crisis can have a different dimension. It depends, on the one hand, on the strength of an active stressor or the value of a critical situation to which an individual is subject. On the other hand, it is a resultant of a person's preparation to react to a stressful situation and external factors that may intensify or weaken its impact. Life experience, personality traits, reaction and help of relatives or therapists can change the level of perception and feeling of a situation conducive to the development of a psychological crisis. This diversification of factors affecting the value of the severity of a crisis is an important signal for potential interventions. They are not powerless in the face of increasing emotional tension in a human in a crisis. They have at their disposal a number of tools that can lead to a reduction in the value of stressors' influence and lead an individual to the state of pre-crisis functioning. An individual itself can also accelerate the process of minimizing the effects of a crisis situation using available techniques. It depends on his/her awareness and resources in the form of own experiences, the strength of coping in stressful situations and motivation for further action.

All the effects of stress on a person prove that it can exert a serious influence on his/her functioning. Overlapping symptoms in the form of changes in the perception of reality, behavior and emotional and somatic zones can significantly reduce the functional potential of an individual and pose a real threat to him/her. What is more, a person deprived of help and left alone, in the absence of adequate resources to deal with the challenges faced, becomes a victim of a specific spiral of attacking symptoms. Subsequent changes identified in his/her behavior and emotional zone can be underestimated and left completely uncontrolled. They can also be a source of new crises through inadequate diagnosis of changes taking

⁹ J. Konieczny, H. Wawrzynowicz, J. Mydlarska, *Psychologia...*, p. 43.

place in the body. In both cases the symptoms may get worse and result in a state of complete collapse and helplessness. Such states can translate into behaviors that are inadequate to the normal human nature and result in the fact that a person – a victim of emotional crisis – becomes the initiator of other crisis situations. Most frequently, these are behaviors that affect the victim's safety (suicide behavior) or other people (aggression blasts, hostage situations, barricades). The critical mental state of people affected by a psychological crisis may take such forms and it is necessary to diagnose such situations early and provide effective help.

Trauma is another state, taking into account the severity of negative effects in the area of mental functioning, there is. It is a subjective response to an extremely stressful experience (resulting from emotional stress or physical injury) and, at the same time, a mental trauma causing mental disorders and disruption of the body balance. Traumatic events can completely destroy faith into the future and trust in own strength. As a consequence, mental and health problems are increasing. Some of them may disappear quickly, while others may persist for years. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety are the most common psychiatric disorders and their level depends on the losses that were incurred and on psychological immunity. Physical disorders often include sleep disorders, post-crisis abuse of alcohol, drugs or cigarettes. Persons affected by serious events (catastrophes, road accidents, armed conflicts, natural disasters, mass shootings, terrorism or bomb explosions) experience more often life problems such as financial problems, conflicts with other people, problems with liquidation of damages. Mental and social resources decrease in victims alongside a weakening feeling of support and social bonds, justice, causation, control and optimism¹⁰.

The concept of an emotional crisis is extremely important from the perspective of solving crisis situations in police operations. Knowledge of the psychological background of the crisis in a perpetrator and the mechanisms governing it allows better assessment of the situation by officers and the use of such intervention methods that will ensure maximum effectiveness. People experiencing emotional crisis situations are often normal people who suddenly face an unusual, extraordinary situation that they cannot overcome with the means available in their resources. This may lead to uncontrollable outbursts of emotions and aggression. Their perception

¹⁰ A. Lipczyński, *Psychologia interwencyjna w sytuacjach kryzysowych*, Warsaw 2007, p. 22.

of reality becomes narrowed down to identifying the most important problem that they are struggling with. Feeling helpless and anxious may result in suicide attempts or actions directed against third parties. Such victims of emotional crises may be the instigators of serious events against public safety, life or health. Not being able to cope independently with the adversities of the often abruptly occurring negative extraordinary events, in the face of loneliness and permanent stress, they decide to take aggressive actions towards other people. They become perpetrators of barricades, mutilations or murders of their relatives as well as hostages, robberies and beatings.

Persons in a state of emotional crisis are also susceptible to all kinds of recruitment activities conducted by organized criminal groups, including terrorist groups. Under the influence of a temporary, difficult state of crisis, not having anything to lose in their subjective opinion, they decide to fight in the name of radical slogans proclaimed by the leaders of spiritual terrorist organizations, believing in securing a prosperous life after death in this way. It also happens that they search for a new way of life in the face of life's disaster. They may be guided by vengeance or manifestations of specific ideological views. This is how the activities of lone wolves are born, who can become a real threat to security, even in the international dimension.

Another important factor from the perspective of responding to crises is the action of people in an emotional crisis under the influence of alcohol, drugs or other intoxicants. Reaching for such stimulants by people seeking to find a way out of a difficult life situation is common and in some environments even acceptable. It is a kind of method of relieving stress and emotional crisis, after which a person should feel rested and relaxed. However, taking into account the nature of the effects of these substances, their consumption often leads to multiplication of anxiety or aggressive states, being a catalyst for criminal behavior. In addition, it should be remembered that communication with such persons is significantly impeded. They function in a double state of contact limitation. On the one hand, they are under the influence of strong emotions that cause difficulties and communication barriers, and on the other hand, they are influenced by intoxicants that can completely exclude the possibility of making effective dialogue with such persons during a crisis.

The last element worth emphasizing from the perspective of police operations is the fact that the majority of interventions undertaken by officers are carried out under the strong influence of stress and emotions.

These states occur on both sides. Perpetrators or persons whom any police actions address are in a situation that is unusual for them. The conversation with an officer alone creates stress and specific consequences of a psychological and physiological nature in many people. However, in the case of intervention, use of direct coercion measures or firearms, the stressor level is much higher. Therefore, inter alia, detainees often behave in an unusual way that is difficult to predict. It is the strong emotions and stress that result in such states, and the behavior of people can be definitely different from the commonly accepted ones. Officers function similarly. They work under the influence of strong emotions and stress, in the vast majority of cases in terms of time and information deficit. It is obvious that proper preparation of police officers through training and exercises should minimize the states, but such situations are not possible to be completely excluded. That is why awareness of aspects of a crisis situation of all its participants is of crucial importance, since knowledge of the nature of human functioning in an emotional crisis enables more effective actions in reducing the effects of negative events in the future.

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CITE THIS ARTICLE AS:

J. Stelmach, *The Nature and Character of the Psychological Crisis in the Aspect of Police Activities*, "Security Dimensions", 2018, no 26, p. 130–142, DOI 10.5604/01.3001.0012.7246.

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