



# The Stress from Butt Calls, Eye-Rollers, Disbelievers & Scowlers

*Law Enforcement and other emergency dispatchers have to listen to a lot just to determine whether or not the call to 911 is actually an emergency. Sometimes it's funny; sometimes it's not.*



More and more, it seems 9-1-1 is becoming public. Not publicly owned or controlled; it's always been like that because you're public servants. Not publicly available, although that's increased too with the ability for landlines, cell phones and computers to access 9-1-1 services through talk and text.

## SIGNS OF STRESS

Be aware of when signs indicate your work is damaging your health.

**Psycho-physiological responses:** your body's reaction to stress, including tight and aching muscles, unsteady hands, nervous tics, restlessness, frequent colds, pain, upset stomach, sweating, strong startle response, headaches, high blood pressure, ulcers, colitis and heart disease to name a few.

**Behavioral-Emotional effects:** the mental strain of stress and our anxious reactions, including hyperactivity, fast walking and talking, nervous habits, poor memory, inattentiveness, excessive worry, irritability, crying, obsessive thoughts, and compulsive actions.

**Tiredness and lack of energy:** telltale signs the stress is getting to you such as general lack of interest, boredom, humorlessness, sleeping a lot or insomnia, apathy, and normal pattern changes.

Although these signs are a normal reaction to the inherent stress of emergency communication, they should be temporary. Unfortunately, they become a much bigger problem if techniques aren't taught to mitigate stress in the moment, as well as, on a regular basis.

## IN THE MOMENT

Many techniques can be used as you face external and internal stresses. They don't require you to leave your seat or to neglect your duties. Here are three examples:

**Breathe:** When faced with a challenging environment, we tend to change our breathing patterns. Our breath often becomes fast and shallow. One of the quickest ways to offset stress is to concentrate on breathing deeply through the nose and exhaling fully through the mouth. This helps increase oxygen to the brain, lowers heart rate and reduces muscle tension.

**Smile:** Buddhist monks practice what is called the Inner Smile. This is created by slightly raising the corner of your lips while adopting the inner stance of a smile. Try smiling big and feel the change inside. Eventually, you can recreate the inner shift of a smile without the outward appearance of a deranged clown.

**Allowing Others:** Dispatchers don't want to give up control. If you don't believe me, try taking over for a dispatcher who is working emergency traffic. We seem to have an inherent need to finish what we started. Or, like a child who refuses to go to sleep, we're afraid we might miss something. Regardless, we need to allow others to step in and help us. If you're offered a break, take it.

## **REDUCE STRESS ON A REGULAR BASIS**

Once you are away from the console, there are ways to reduce the physiological effects of stress. Meditation and journaling help by calming the mind and allowing thoughts to free flow. Often, we hyper-obsess over an incident ruminating over and over about what we could have done differently. Performing a meditation around the event or jotting it down can help us let it go.

Exercise is another great stress reducer. Even getting outside for a 10 minute walk will help. Interact with a pet. There's nothing more calming than a pet's unconditional love.

Write a gratitude list. Our work is 99-percent negative. External and internal situations create feelings of lack of control and over time bitterness. Take a moment to write out all the things you like about what you do.

After all, it takes a special person to be an emergency communications operator.

For employees, dealing with stress in the moment and over the long-term, we can improve our physical and mental health. We can increase our focus and our ability to do our jobs well and make our work environment more pleasant. For managers, helping employees manage stress will increase job satisfaction, skill level, performance and decrease absenteeism and burnout. Taught from the very beginning and we're given tools we can use for a life-time.

Not a tragedy goes by now without a news clip appearing several days later playing the 9-1-1 call live. What used to be things I only heard in my headset, I can now hear from my television, radio or computer speakers. And, I don't have to catch the "tragic, humorous, ridiculous, fill-in-the-blank call" right then. They are archived on media sites, as well as, the ultimate voyeuristic site, YouTube.

After a recent urban call-center captain did an investigation into telecommunications operator's work on YouTube, they started thinking about the types of calls received and some of the reactions they can create.

## **BUTT CALLS / POCKET DIALS**

These calls give the operator front row seats to everything from silence to conversations to musical concerts. Although butt calls can be amusing, especially if they include a snippet of conversation between two people discussing something private, they can also be frustrating when it's a super-busy summer Friday night and the calls just keep coming and coming. As operators, are required to listen to enough of the call to establish it is just a butt dial and not a terrified 15 year-old girl hiding in the closet scared to breathe lest she be heard by the rapist/murderer who just climbed in the window.



## EYE-ROLLERS

Many of these calls begin with, “This isn’t an emergency, but...” Seriously, if there’s a “but” involved, it might have been worth the time to look up the non-emergency number. On the other hand, I found many of these calls just met the minimum criteria for being an appropriate 9-1-1 call (just barely).

## DISBELIEVERS

I can think of a few other ways to describe these calls, but most involve four-letter words that would have gotten my mouth washed out with soap as a child. Disbeliever calls are those where you just cannot believe the person is calling 9-1-1 with their particular type of problem.

## SCOWLERS

Some citizens know how to play the system. They know the keywords to get an officer out fast in any situation and they often don’t hide what they are doing. But, due to policies and protocols, there is nothing an operator can do in these situations except for play the role of the pawn and send out units

As public safety telecommunications operators, you handle a lot of calls. Many are true emergencies, but some are butt calls, eye-rollers, disbelievers and scowlers. Keep up the god Job!!!

