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December 2014/January 2015  
MAGAZINE™

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# K-9 Stress Inoculation Prior to Deployments

*By Rodney Spicer*





**“ I knew this day was coming  
and I am ready! ”**







In early 2003, I was asked to take part in developing a training program that was later named “Combat Stress Inoculation” by a highly distinguished group.

## By Definition

**Stress:** Bodily or mental tension resulting from factors that tend to alter an existing equilibrium.

**Inoculation:** A small dose of a virus in your system prepares and defends you against a larger challenge.

Individuals were to begin with performing a variety of calisthenics for a period of time. When their time in the rotation was to begin, they would have to sprint up to 100 yards where I would begin to give them directions for the unannounced scenarios they were to encounter. Directions were given one time only. We would then begin with several unannounced scenarios while increasing the levels of stress with each scenario as well as verbal motivation from staff.

The goal of stress inoculation is to place individuals in stressful scenarios, thus inoculating with small doses of stress so that they can overcome a greater challenge by gaining confidence and learning to better cope with fear and anxiety during stressful encounters.

During the scenarios, the heart rate was sustained as high as 200 plus beats per minute. As this happens, the motor skills can begin to deteriorate as the heart rate increases. What we can see with individuals during the stress inoculation period is a failure to follow direction, tunnel vision, hearing loss, loss of memory, freezing and/or quitting. Individuals that have already been exposed to stress inoculation training generally recover quickly, gain control of the scenario and push forward with no negative results to the scenarios and are able to follow direction.

Several years prior to developing the “Combat Stress Inoculation” class, I was the agitator in a dog competition. As the dog began to engage and bite me, I began driving into the dog. The dog went under my leg

and I stepped on its foot. The dog let go, went backwards and then re-engaged. Again, as I began to drive the dog, it went under my leg and I stepped on its foot for a second time. The dog let go, went backwards and would no longer engage. I felt terrible for the dog team and was embarrassed. The fact was that the dog was a great pet and the handler was getting the most out of a dog selected as a pet. The dog was not introduced to stress and pressure or how to cope with it as well as lacking a correct working character. This was a valuable lesson for me and reinforced that my police service dog training with stress inoculation was correct.

We can see the direct effects of stress in dogs just as we can with people. In my opinion, based on my training and experience, they are both very similar. A dog, just as a person, can become highly aroused and then a complete adrenaline dump and become completely exhausted. The PSD can be in a stressful confrontation and seconds later appear to be completely out of shape with heavy panting, avoiding eye contact and wanting to lay down. Symptoms can be licking lips/paws, yawning, pacing, becoming verbal by barking, whining or growling, handler aggression, diarrhea, express glands, avoidance and developing anxiety to working associations.

We can see these symptoms in training. The PSD is sent out to search, looks right at the role playing bad guy and continues on like the role playing bad guy was never there. This scenario can be due to an incorrect PSD character compounded with stress and anxiety due to the associated stressful confrontation.

When a PSD candidate passes an evaluation and testing period, the job is just beginning. Many PSD candidates have only had exposure to a training environment consisting of a grass field with minimal social, environmental and opposition exposure to real world environments. The three areas of stress inoculation the PSD team needs to focus on is opposition, environment and the tools deployed with.



## **By Definition:**

**Opposition:** Action that is done to stop or defeat someone or something.

**Environment:** External conditions or surroundings, especially those in which people live or work.

When I begin a training program, I always set an end goal and then develop a plan. My mindset is that I have to take a dog, generally with a sport foundation, that was imprinted on a grass training field and now introduce real world environments. I take the obedience from the grass to the street by conducting obedience exercises in parking lots and inside of buildings, utilizing stairs, sounds and different floor surfaces. This will continue throughout the PSD's career. A PSD with correct character and balanced drives will generally show little to no signs of stress. Train in the environments you work in whether it's urban, rural or a combination of both.

Opposition training – it is very important that the PSD become inoculated to stressful engagements and confrontations. The PSD must know that this fight will stop and I will make you submit! In one particular K-9 incident, a suspect was apprehended by a PSD. It was soon after the apprehension that it was found out the suspect was on parole. The next day, his parole officer contacted the K-9 handler and told him that the suspect said he learned a technique in the yard at prison called “defeating the K-9.” He then added, “It does not work.”

The suspect is preparing for you and you need to prepare for him. The mindset needs to be, “I knew this day was coming and I am ready!”

When I begin opposition training, I generally will have the PSD back-tied on a tie out pole. Being back-tied gives the agitator a defined safe radius and distance to work the PSD. The agitator can use no equipment, a sleeve, hidden sleeve, bite suit or muzzle, depending on the goal of the exercise. If the agitator is using the bite suit, he can generally present where he wants the PSD to bite since the PSD is back-tied. Once the PSD engages and bites the suit, the agitator can go to the ground, wrap legs around the PSD, stand up and move around and back to ground, as well as using props. In the beginning, the handler can be with the PSD to support with praise by petting. The agitator can and should also begin to go hands on by petting with simultaneous pulling to re-enforce the grip. I then like to begin pushing on the PSD's head and grabbing his feet while the handler is giving praise. The PSD needs to be confident, secure and desensitized to being touched. The goal in stress inoculation is to overcome a greater challenge. The vast majority of suspects go hands on with the PSD and the PSD needs to know this is ok and just like training. If the PSD is having some issues, then you may need to re-evaluate and develop a new plan. At this point, stress is minimal and I may do a few sessions each day for a few days to make new associations.

Once I begin with stronger agitator opposition, again at this point the PSD is back tied. I then introduce props/obstacles. For example, I will use a barrel in front of the agitator where the PSD has to get on top of the barrel which is on its side to engage. Just like people, when you leave your feet off the ground you lose your balance and security. I have the agitator pulling to reinforce the grip while the PSD is on the barrel and moving. The agitator can begin touching the PSD, putting a blanket over his head so the PSD can't see, empty water jugs, with water (super soaker/spray bottle) for added overhead or direct opposition. I then use the barrel for the PSD to go inside and bite the leg and have the agitator go to the ground and again repeat with stress from the props. I will do this exercise a few brief sessions again for a few days. When the exercise is over, always give verbal and physical praise when leaving the exercise location and let the PSD retrieve his reward toy. Stress needs to be relieved over and over in order to better recover.

Now we have taken the PSD from a grass training field to real world environments and have been inoculating with increasing levels of stress so that the PSD is now becoming more secure, clear and confident to the expectations. These exercises can be conducted in the environments that you deploy in, such as vehicles, bathroom stalls, under houses, dumpsters, etc.

The last phase of opposition training is now off lead. The PSD must know that they can pursue, seek out and engage away and independent of the handler with confidence. The agitator can either hold a trash can or board used as a shield against the upper body only offering the PSD to bite the leg. The PSD must not pick and choose what to apprehend but must bite what is accessible. Once the PSD engages, the agitator will apply overhead pressure with the prop and begin to go hands on the PSD. The handler should not give praise at this time and remain silent for an extended period. You might be in a situation where you cannot get to the location quickly and the PSD must know that he is ok and has prepared for this scenario. Another exercise I do is to set out barrels, chairs and other obstacles. The PSD is muzzled and sent to apprehend the agitator who is wearing no equipment and must fend off the PSD. When the PSD is given the command to apprehend, the agitator begins to flee, knocking down obstacles in the PSD's path. The agitator will also grab props and fend the PSD off for a brief period and then flee again while obstructing the PSD's path. This scenario will continue for a period of time before the PSD is allowed to make contact. When the PSD does make contact, the agitator always falls to the ground and begins to roll like they are on fire so the PSD continues to pursue the prey as his is still muzzled. The goal is to pursue, not give up – you will get submission.

*Videos of this training can be found on my YouTube page at [1goldcoastK9](#).*



**“ Do not expect the combat fairy to come bonk you with the combat wand and suddenly make you capable of doing things that you never rehearsed before. It will not happen! ”**

From the book “On Combat”





Remember that this PSD possibly came from a sport background or kennel with limited environmental exposure and now must be inoculated to real world environments and expectations. Examples can be of searching under a house or in an attic in low to no light, barricaded suspects in vehicles or rooms, pursuits over fences, taken up ladders and lowered from roof tops, engagements in confined areas such as dumpsters, closets, bathrooms, stairs, and exiting take down vehicles, etc. Trainers, handlers and agitators need to walk through and rehearse scenarios prior to running full speed so that everyone involved understands their role and knows how to react if the exercise or desired results change. Training needs to be clear, consistent and repetitive.

Inoculating to the tools of the job such as CN/CS/OC agents, smoke, obedience while giving commands wearing gas mask, range training with different caliber weapons, light sound diversionary device, flares and arrest teams in close quarters, etc.

If the PSD is not inoculated with stress and opposition, environment and tools of the job, how can we expect a reliable performance during a critical incident? When we look at deployment failures, it is generally due to three areas: incorrect working character, lack of rehearsal to real world scenarios or proper stress inoculation.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Police Service Dog “Rudy” L.O.D.D. April 20, 2002. As Rudy was pursuing a wanted suspect armed with a knife, he was stabbed in the heart as he was taking the suspect to the ground. The suspect immediately began striking Rudy in the face. Rudy stayed in the fight and only released his grip when commanded to do so by his handler. It was not until the suspect was taken into custody, that Rudy fell to the ground and succumbed to the fatal stab wound. That evening Rudy possibly saved the suspect’s life and prevented other officers from being injured. Rudy did exactly what he was trained to do. ■

*Scan the following code to find videos of this training on YouTube:*

