

Book Review

South Africa's High-stress Security Environment: Keys to Coping

Gerhard Schoeman

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Gerhard Schoeman, an experienced industrial psychologist, draws from his extensive South African National Defence Force (SANDF) background to author *South Africa's High-stress Security Environment: Keys to Coping*. His work in selecting and training personnel for high-stress roles is evident in his thorough exploration of stress management within the South African (SA) security industry. Schoeman makes a unique contribution to the security industry in general – and, more specifically, the SA security industry – for various reasons.

The book is well structured and provides practical insights, beginning with a comprehensive contextualisation of the security industry in South Africa, emphasising the stress to which employees in this environment are exposed. Schoeman effectively explains the nature of stress and its effect on individuals within the security sector, and offers strategies for coping. The detailed chapters on understanding stress and coping mechanisms are particularly valuable for academics and practitioners. The author then focuses on the individual exposed to stress by referring to coping and the key to dealing with stress, which is to know oneself. Schoeman next informs the reader about a person's psychological resources and how these assist with coping. He suggests a model for stress, particularly for the security industry, and concludes the book with a last word on stress and the way forward.

When looking more closely at the content, Chapters 1 to 3 contextualise the book within the SA security industry, which has to fill the void left by the inability of the South African Police Service to cover all risks, dangers and threats. The dangerous environment in which security officers in South Africa work is well described, and shocking SA crime statistics are presented. The powerlessness of the current justice system to deter criminals is criticised, which supports the importance of the security officer coping in this environment, as lives depend on their ability to cope. Within this context, Schoeman emphasises that the ability of security officers to use healthy coping mechanisms under these high-stress situations is essential for the safety of their colleagues and clients. For security officers, their work environment is a "battlefield",¹ and mention is made of all the efforts security companies make to implement wellness programmes and look after the well-being of their employees.

Furthermore, the book includes a comprehensive review of various security occupations such as VIP protectors, cash-in-transit guards, armed response, and security guards, effectively situating the discussion within the broader context of occupational stress research. The author provides fascinating information on the contribution the security industry makes to economic growth in SA, the third largest employer that grows at a rate of 30 per cent per year, and protects assets and financial resources worth hundreds of billions of rands.² Interestingly, Schoeman states that the security industry is larger than the South African Police Service. BusinessTech reported in 2019, that there are 2,5 security officers for each policeman in South Africa.³

The above is followed by a thorough and logically organised literature review covered by Chapters 4–7, focusing on understanding stress by defining it, contextualising it to the physically and psychologically demanding security industry. Schoeman discusses how stress affects security officers, explaining how to deal with stress, and finally discusses what personality dimensions enhance coping, with an emphasis on self-knowledge. Interestingly, the author emphasises that managing stress is not about avoiding it. A minor criticism, however, is that the book is, in this instance, aimed towards academics rather than towards laypeople. Despite the criticism, there is ample reading for the reader who wants to explore the phenomenon, and a comprehensive list of references that could be used for further exploration.

Stress in the security environment has always been a reality of life. Since the early 1990s, this type of stress has started affecting people in the workplace more significantly than ever before.⁴ Schoeman prefers Weiten's definition of stress as any circumstances that threaten or are perceived to threaten a person's well-being, thereby exceeding the person's ability to cope.⁵ The threat may be immediate physical safety, self-esteem, reputation, peace of mind, or anything a person values. Furthermore, Schoeman contextually describes stress as emanating from a dangerous working environment where people fear for their lives because of high crime rates, and where it is difficult to cope with the situations to which employees are exposed. The author presents several key stress management and coping models from the psychology literature, setting the stage for his stress management model in high-risk environments. After reviewing the various models, he identifies four main themes of stress and coping models from the literature review:

- Stress is a complex and dynamic process that changes over time;
- Both individual and environmental sources for stress exist;
- There is an appraisal process that influences how people cope with stress; and
- There are consequences to stress that influence both the individual and the organisation for which they work.

Schoeman emphasises the importance of understanding the causes of stress before attempting to manage it. In the absence of high-risk security environment literature – which also confirms the gap in the literature that the book intended to address – the author leaned heavily on research done in the police and military in South Africa, which are closely related to the security environment and are also high-risk environments. For some

readers, such as practitioners who want to solve a practical problem in the workplace, the literature on high-risk occupations can be a bit tedious. Academics, however, will value the information and will probably want to explore the literature further. The author manages to draw the reader into the world of the security employee to give them understanding and empathy when he refers to Burgess, who quoted a cash-in-transit guard: ‘Once you have been in one of these attacks [cash-and-transit attacks], you operate in this constant state of hyper vigilance. Nothing is ever green – it’s always orange and red. You become twitchy, jumpy and trigger happy’ [*sic*].⁶ This emphasises the chronic nature of stress in a high-risk environment, and one then understands the staff turnover of about 200 per cent, to which the author refers.⁷

The importance of coping is evident when Schoeman spends three chapters (Chapters 6–8) on this theme before presenting his suggested model for coping in a fourth chapter (Chapter 9). The author provides an exciting chapter on coping (Chapter 6), which offers fascinating insights, especially regarding defence mechanisms and healthy and unhealthy coping strategies. Schoeman emphasises the extent of coping, and argues that it is not a once-off process but a set of responses over time, influenced by the demands, resources and constraints of both the person and the environment. He also explains how he compiled the dimensions for his coping questionnaire as described in Chapter 9. The general chapter on coping (Chapter 6) is followed by a chapter on personality and coping, emphasising the importance of self-knowledge in dealing with stress effectively. Schoeman suggests that coping should be redefined as a process to self-regulate a person’s personality in stressful situations based on their goals, needs and feelings. People will therefore have coping preferences for different situations, manifesting as an extension of their personality traits and how they appraise stressful events.

Moreover, Schoeman discusses the role of psychological resources, such as locus of control, self-efficacy, self-esteem, sense of coherence, resilience, and courage, which can be helpful when coping with high-level stressors. Although the author indicates that he did not include it in his development of a model to manage stress, it was still interesting to read about it. Exploring these resources further to refine and develop his model will be worthwhile.

Chapter 9 is a cornerstone of the book, presenting a practical model for coping with stress in the security industry. The model is well articulated and supported by theoretical and empirical evidence, making it a valuable tool for practitioners. The book offers understandable figures to explain complex issues. On top of that, Schoeman gives a brief overview of how he developed a coping questionnaire scientifically and statistically that can indicate how a person copes with stress. He shares his interesting findings that all people – regardless of gender, age or work experience – experience stress the same way. After investigating the relationship between coping and personality he developed a very comprehensive model for dealing with stress consisting of four components: a stressor, appraisal of the stressor, coping strategies that may be either healthy or unhealthy, and positive outcomes when coping effectively (or negative consequences when not coping effectively). The exposed person’s personality probably influences the appraisal and choice of coping. Much detail is provided in the model, and this is comprehensively

described by Schoeman. The value of this model lies in it being easy to understand. Some elements had been tested statistically, and others were derived from theory. The model also provides examples of healthy and unhealthy coping strategies, and can thus guide an affected person to opt for healthy strategies to cope with exposure to a highly stressful event. Because it is represented visually as a simplified model contributes to a good understanding, making it easy for security companies, as employers, to understand the effect of the work on their employees. The model can also assist in developing a customised wellness programme and an employee assistance programme, which may include targeted interventions.

It is, however, worth noting that the font size used throughout the book is relatively small. While this may pose a slight challenge to some readers, the richness of the content and quality of the arguments presented far outweigh this minor inconvenience. Readers prepared to overlook this aspect will be greatly rewarded with a wealth of knowledge and a deep understanding of coping with stress in the SA security environment. In conclusion, despite the smaller font size (which might be negated if one buys an electronic version of the book), *South Africa's High-stress Security Environment: Keys to Coping* provides invaluable insights into stress management in high-risk environments. Its scholarly rigour and practical applications make it a must-read for academics and practitioners in the field. What is also of value is that the final chapter (Chapter 10) provides helpful tips for employers and individuals, and recommendations are made for the security industry. These recommendations and tips include creating awareness, arranging wellness days, enhancing training, and doing research, to name a few. This book is a resource for all security stakeholders and can be recontextualised to other stressful environments. As Faan du Toit, the chief executive officer of Omega Risk Solutions, states in the foreword, 'this book is welcomed and long overdue.'⁸

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Endnotes

- ¹ G Schoeman, *South Africa's High-stress Security Environment: Keys to Coping* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2023), 14.
- ² Kole (2015) and Minnaar (2005), as cited in Schoeman, *South Africa's High-stress Security Environment*, 14.
- ³ Businesstech, 'The Number of Police Officers vs Security Guards in South Africa', 13 July 2019, <https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/325093/the-number-of-police-officers-vs-security-guards-in-south-africa/> [Accessed on 14 October 2025].
- ⁴ Schoeman, *South Africa's High-stress Security Environment*, 21.
- ⁵ W Weiten, *Psychology: Themes and Variations*, 9th ed. (Belmont: Cengage Learning, 2014), 554.
- ⁶ Schoeman, *South Africa's High-stress Security Environment*, 44.
- ⁷ Schoeman, *South Africa's High-stress Security Environment*, 47.
- ⁸ Schoeman, *South Africa's High-stress Security Environment*, xiii.

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