

Evaluation of The Art of Living Basic Course as the Anti-stress Program for Police Officers in the Slovenian Police

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Abstract

The antistress program is one of the recent measures with the purpose to introduce a prevention model of psycho-hygienic activities in the Slovenian police, started in 1998. For the evaluation of its implementation and contents, the authors elaborated a questionnaire and interviewed the program participants. They evaluated the appropriacy of its contents, implementation and usefulness for the work of a police officer. The majority of participants answered the questions, they evaluated very positively the contents of the program, its usefulness at police work and its implementation, where the participants took an active part and thus acquired direct experiences. Based on very favourable group estimation of the participants of the implementation of the program, the authors estimate that this form of antistress training is a more than acceptable component of the psycho-hygienic activity in the Slovenian police.

Keywords: Stress, Distress, Eustress Antistress program, Preventive psycho-hygienic model, Stressors, Breathing techniques, Meditation, Self-realisation.

1 Introduction

Changed social relations, increasingly critical attitude of general public towards the police, the increase of serious forms of crime¹ as well as constant organisational changes influence negatively the work of police officers in Slovenia. The majority of the employees in the police are left to themselves when it comes to solving their everyday work problems, problems at home or in their living environment. Stressful situations influence their well-being, interpersonal relations and health. Stress contributes to higher rate of absence from work, and this in return increases the work load of other employees, which increases the labour costs². This is one of the reasons why it is essential to do more for the well-being and health of police officers. This is among others confirmed also by the findings of the research by Seli and Umek³, where the authors establish that antistress programs and activities are an irreplaceable element of the preventive psycho-hygienic model^{4,5,6,7}.

The Department for safety and health at work in the police gave an initiative, based on the findings of the above mentioned research, to carry out an antistress program. In 1998, the "Training of the employees to cope with stressful situations at work" was placed among the priority tasks of the strategy to

insure safety and health at work. In autumn of this year, the first presentation of the anti-stress program was organised in cooperation with the Institute for Strengthening of Human Values in Ljubljana^{A1}. The program took place at the Ministry of Internal Affairs and at the Police Administration Ljubljana. In the years to follow, 12 anti-stress programs and one advanced course have been organised. The aim of the research was to get an answer to the question, whether the contents and the scope of the program are appropriate for police officers.

2 Influence of stress on performance at work.

The action of human brains is subjected to a unique dynamics. We are not aware of the present moment and our thoughts are constantly engaged in the past or the future. We often regret our acts in the past and are worried about the future. Only thinking about what is going on in our personal or career lives can burden us and cause stress. Most of people do not even recognise the first signs of stress. Stress can be felt as discomfort, anxiety, which gradually becomes pain and can cause serious illnesses. How to fight these everyday problems? How to diminish the influence of stress and preserve health? How to avoid daily loads and live happily with all that we have? And at the same time how to take responsibility for our work, family, friends and ourselves? These are the questions that we often forget and become aware of them only when we are in a deep crisis, when we get ill or maybe start looking for inner peace. Inner peace and stress are in this way fatally connected. They are two poles that are at the same time opposite and supplementary. Without stress it is more difficult to realise inner peace, without inner peace we could not know stress.

Different authors explain stress in different ways. H. Selye was the first to define stress⁸ as a non-specific reaction of the organism as a stereotype adaptive biological phylogenetic protective mechanism, which responds to different demands and influences of the environment. Stress can be described as an experience of psychosocial nature, which causes psychical suffering and unpleasant physiological processes threatening the organism⁹. Stotland defined stress simply as a person's overload in a certain situation⁸. Overload is caused by different factors, so-called stressors (physical, biological, psychological, social, etc.).

The environment influence man on the physical, psychological, biological and social levels and has positive as well as negative consequences, and these are difficult to summarise by a short definition. The fact is that the same impacts from the environment can influence different people in the same time differently. In the same way, also the same impacts from the environment influence the same people in different time differently.¹⁰ Generally, the term stress denotes an event or several events which influence people negatively.

Stressful events influence the behaviour of individuals, bring

up anger, aggression, grief, restlessness – these emotions extend then into the working environment of this person. For this reason stressful events are a problem for society as well as for the police. Police officers who are under stress are overburdened, which makes it more difficult for them to focus at work. Illnesses which appear as the consequence of stress demand treatments and thus absence from work. This, on the other hand, means additional overload for other workers and thus also larger labour costs².

3 Antistress Programs

All police forces in the world are facing the consequences of stress that the police officers are exposed to in line of duty, but they treat the consequences of such stressful events with different degree of seriousness. Accordingly, individual police organisations approach the solving of stressful situations or training of police officers differently. In New York, the Department for the Support of Equality within NYPD, active in the framework of the Manhattan Association of Psychotherapists, trained a group of voluntary police officials who help their colleagues in coping with stressful situations. The volunteers were selected through a preliminary testing of their adequacy and their readiness to invest time and effort to help others in stressful situations. After an 80-hour intensive program the volunteers are qualified to help their colleagues. Also, the whole time they are assisted by the Association of Psychotherapists¹¹. In Los Angeles the Sheriff's Office approached the program of training in the field of stress prevention and early intervention in the case of police stress, intended for the supervisory and management personnel. The program renders it possible to recognise stress and treat such problems with the assistance of psychologists¹². In Great Britain, the stress of police officers and managerial staff, emerging during the work time and in connection with work that needs to be done, is alarming¹³. A research on the police stress in the area of England and Wales estimates that from one million of lost days for sickness leave as much as 25% can be ascribed to stress in working environment, such as work overload, lack of personnel, transfers and organisational changes. The authors establish that more attention needs to be paid to the question of stress, as it is the question of individual's health and job, and to approach the solution of this problem. They believe that police could use such techniques to prevent and diminish stress as are being used in other organisations, such as raising the awareness of the causes of stress and consulting for diminishing the consequences of stress. The present situation should be addressed by a long-term insurance of adequate financial means, research, a strategic plan in several phases and by responding to special needs in the police, such as in the case of posttraumatic stress disturbances - PTSD². FBI developed the program CISM (Critical Incident Stress Management) for the protection and development of psychical condition of workers after traumatic events, such as bomb raids, negotiations, loss of a partner in action and similar situations. Thus, their employees now have, beside physical training for survival, also the tools that help them survive after shocking events. The program offers immediate as well as long-term assistance. Immediate help is offered to employees who face stressful situations already several hours after the event in the form of a talk. After several days this is followed by a

group talk, later on by personal meeting with an employee who had similar experience and is trained to help, and then cooperation of family, assistance of managerial personnel and some other methods. They believe that this intervention method can be effective also in other police organisations¹⁴.

3.1 Antistress Program For Police Officers

The implementation of anti-stress programs for police officers in Slovenia is a preventive model intended for the police officers in all positions. It is executed as a special program that approaches the participants from several viewpoints, such as:

- Self-realisation on the physical as well as spiritual level
- Application of different breathing and relaxation techniques
- Realisation of different possibilities for healthier way of live, spending free time and diet.

The contents of the antistress program for police officers are adapted to the nature of police work, where the working and living environment is also taken into account. The program is based on cooperation and the participants learn about:

- breathing techniques which calm down, relax in the psychical and physical sense and increase the resistance of body, which improves the psychical and physical health;
- breathing techniques which increase the lungs capacity, deepen the breathing, accelerate the elimination of toxins from the body and improve the blood circulation;
- special physical exercise with breathing which improves beside flexibility also the power to focus and balance the emotions; 1

During the training the participants are also introduced to:

- the processes of self-realisation which contribute to clearer actions of mind, emotions and memory;
- lead meditations which enable deeper rest, raise the energy and accelerate relaxation;
- special thematic complexes, such as:
 - perception of stress;
 - reflection of stress in the physical body;
 - the ways to influence the decrease of stress;
- the importance of inner harmony and success of actions that are executed in the state of focus;
- the importance of breathing as a means of achieving inner peace, appeasing emotions and focusing the mind;
- the importance of breathing as a means of raising energy;
- the importance of appropriate diet;
- the importance of appropriate physical activity;
- the importance of taking responsibility at work, at home and in the social environment;
- the meaning of happiness and obstacles in reaching happiness;
- tolerance and accepting diversity;
- causal relationship between action and reaction in everyday life;

- the ways of realising inner potentials.

Considering the fact that the participants take an active part in the program, the contents of the program are adapted to each group, but at the same time they deal with those problems which are the main reason for stressful situations.

3.2 The Importance Of Antistress Program For The Work Of Police Officers

In their line of duty police officers most often meet people with different problems, those who are victims of others and with perpetrators of different deviate actions. When investigating criminal acts, they meet victims and perpetrators of criminal acts, and in the field of traffic they meet violators of regulations on safety of traffic, they deal with traffic accidents with injured or casualties. The police officers who guard the national border are most often faced with persons who want to cross the national border illegally and those who organise illegal transits. With all these events and tasks the police officers must respect the law, must act professionally, with responsibility, reliability, independently, must be communicative, respectful and show humanity in the procedures. All these tasks and the specific character of individual events expose the police officers to various types of pressure which cause stress. Stress then causes such conditions as fatigue, irritability, impatience, anger, sarcasm, brutality, lack of focus, etc. These conditions in the procedures with citizens often lead to conflict situations and in the worst case to unfounded use of force and consequently to grievances.

In order to avoid conflict situations and grievances in the police as much as possible, police officers need to be adequately trained for their area of work. A part of knowledge the police officer can also acquire in the anti-stress program where they learn to sense stress, experience it, about post-stress situation and using adequate techniques to diminish the negative effects of stress.

4 Research Of Opinions On The Implementation Of Antistress Programs

From October 1998 to June 1999, six antistress programs for police officers were carried out. All anti-stress programs were weekend courses in the Training Centre Gotenica, as the participants needed peace for the implementation of the program. The program was carried out as a workshop. With the program the participants learned on their own experiences:

- how to sense stress;
- how to react when a stressful situation is expected;
- what to do when facing a stressful event when already stressed out;
- how to alleviate and gradually remove the consequences of stress after a certain event.

Beside the **breathing techniques, meditation** and several other techniques which are part of us and we do them automatically as a defence mechanism, the participants learned to get to know themselves and the possible ways how to handle stressful situations.

The Sector for Health Security and Safety at Work prepared in

cooperation with High Police Security School and the Institute for Strengthening of Human Values a questionnaire with 19 questions, with the purpose of acquiring the answer about the adequacy of the antistress program. It included questions about the participants' opinion on the antistress program, whether they believed that such training was necessary and how they evaluated it. The first part of the questionnaire was intended to acquiring the data on age, years of work, gender and place of work on the local, regional and national level of police organisation. Then followed questions on the evaluation of the antistress program, the use of knowledge after the course, the evaluation of the program contents, implementation of the program, usefulness of the program for other employees in the police and the adequacy considering the time and place. The last group of questions was intended to learn about the sensations of the participants when they use the knowledge and techniques. In the end of the questionnaire the participants were asked to give their comments, suggestions and advice regarding the organisation as well as the implementation of the program. The questionnaire was sent to the participants in September 1999.

4.1 Presentation Of Participants, The Process Of Investigation And Used Statistic Methods

116 participants from the national, regional and local level of the police organisation and the Transition Home for foreigners of the Republic of Slovenia took part at the program: 61 participants from the national, 30 from the regional and 25 from the local level. The age of the participants was between 21 and 52 years, there were 24 women and 92 men. Police officers of different levels of responsibility in their police work took part at the program (police officers, duty officers, commanders, inspectors of police administrations, directors of police administrations and inspections and managers of internal organisational units of the general police administration).

From 116 sent questionnaires, in autumn 1996 the Sector for Health Security and Safety of Work received 65 (56%) filled-in questionnaires. The age of the respondents was between 25 and 52 years, and on average 38.2 years. The average work time in years was 15.8 years. The longest work time was 35 years and one participant had no work time.

14 (21.5%) women and 51 (78.5%) men, employed on different levels (Table 1), returned the questionnaires :

Table 1: Level of employment

Level	f	%
Local level	15	23.1 %
Regional level	18	27.7 %
National level	31	47.7 %
Unknown	1	1.5%

The obtained data were analysed using the statistic program SPSS for Windows, where the method of frequency distribution, the method of arithmetic mean and deviation, the method of factor analysis, and the method of the interval of trust with 95% level of confidence were used.

4.2 Answers Of The Respondents

The participants evaluated the antistress program on the scale from 1 to 5. More than one half (56.9%) evaluated the program as very good, a good third (38.5%) of the participants evaluated the program as good, two participants (3.1%) could not decide and only 1 participant evaluated the program as poor (Figure 1).

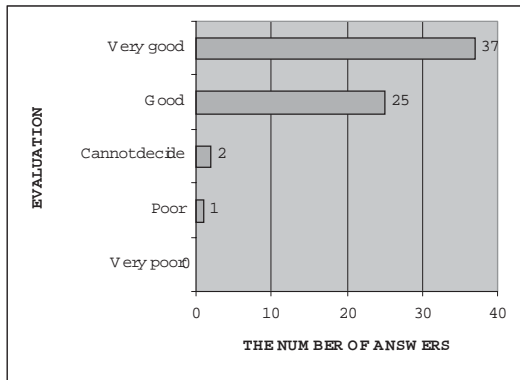


Figure 1 : Evaluation of the antistress program

The majority of the participants answered to the question, if they were using the knowledge they received in antistress program, with yes, almost 8% answered that they did not use the knowledge. The participants use individual parts of knowledge with different frequency (Table 2).

Table 2 : Frequency of use

	stretching with Uijayi breathing	three-level breathing bellows	healing breath	other knowledge	
every day	1	5	4	1	6
several times a week	10	6	10	7	1
at least once a week	8	10	10	3	3
several times a month	5	7	5	13	1
at least once a month	2	3	2	5	1
when I feel the need	12	7	7	6	11

The majority of the participants (13) do the technique of healing breath several times a month, 12 participants do the technique Uijayi, when they feel the need, and 11 participants use other knowledge when they feel the need. Table 3 shows that some participants do individual techniques regularly in different time periods, and some participants use the knowledge only when they feel the need.

The participants stated different reasons why they do not use the knowledge they received at the program (Table 3). Some participants who use the knowledge also answered the questions, but only in a few cases.

Table 3: The main reason for not using the knowledge they received at the program

ANSWER	f	%
Did not answer the question.	19	29.2
When I need the acquired knowledge, I do not remember it.	12	18.5
I do not feel the need to use the acquired knowledge.	5	7.7
I forget how to do the techniques	8	12.3

Other (state);

21 32

Less than a third of the respondents stated other reasons why they did not use the knowledge, acquired at the program. Thus, three participants answered that they used also some other types of relaxation; two participants answered that some techniques were easier and more efficient to do in a group; as much as ten participants replied that they used the knowledge less frequently because they did not find time. One participant expressed opinion that the contents of the program and its positive effects would need better explanation. Five participants responded that they used the acquired knowledge when they felt the need; one participant stated that he found the reason for not using the knowledge in the fact that he did not ask it from himself; one of the participant stated that it would be necessary to repeat the techniques for 1 day every 3 months. One of them proposed to find a program that other police forces in Europe used.

The participants who finished the anti-stress program can meet every two weeks in the Special Unit in the evening hours, where they renew the acquired knowledge and do some techniques. Because of the distance from their homes, some cannot participate at these meetings. For this reason we asked them if they would take part at these meetings if they were organised closer to their homes. The answers show that only 4 participants (6.2%) would not come to such meetings, but others would. Out of them, 12 (18.5%) would come to such meetings very frequently.

The participants answered the question, whether they would recommend the participation at the anti-stress program to other co-workers on the scale from 1 to 7 with the average grade 6.4 (Figure 2). As many as 84.6% of the respondents answered with the grade 6 or more.

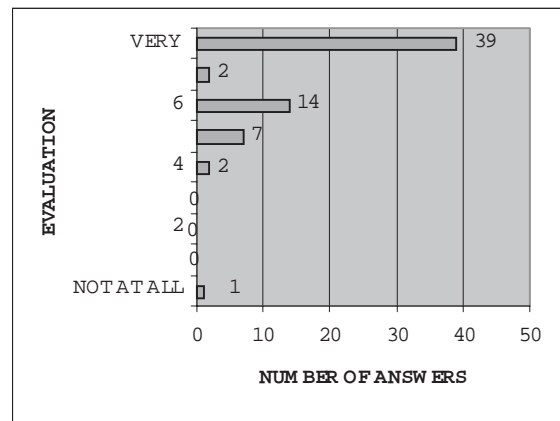


Figure 2: Recommendations to others participants

The contents of the anti-stress program include breathing techniques, recognising stress at the physical level, releasing stress, self-realisation in different situations and getting to know the source of the contents of knowledge. The contents of the program were evaluated by the participants with the average grade of 6.05. Almost 70% of the evaluated the contents of the program with 6 or more and only one participant (1.5%) thought that the contents were inappropriate (Figure 3).

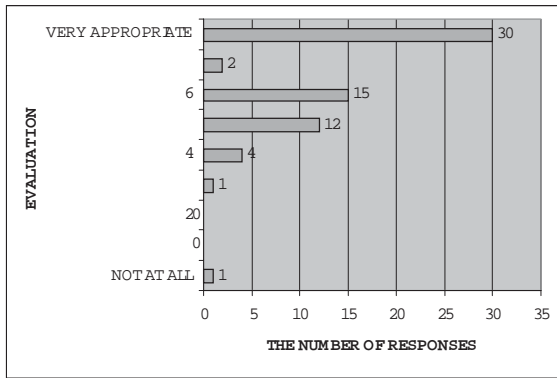


Figure 3: Evaluation of the contents of the program

The antistress program was held by a foreign teacher, which is why we aimed to find out the evaluation of the teacher in the program. The participants evaluated the implementation of the program with the average grade of 6.3. 86.2% of the respondents evaluated the program with the grade 6 or more (Figure 4).

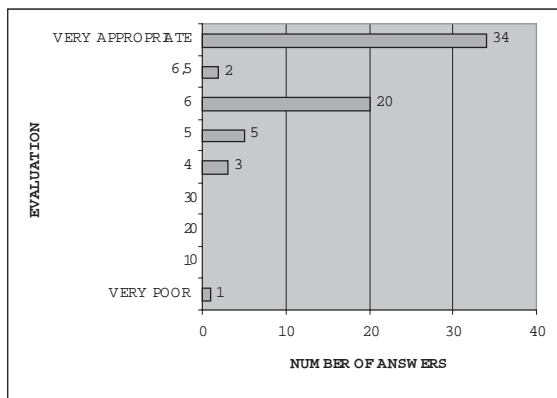


Figure 4: Evaluation of the implementation of the program

With the knowledge about what stress is, how it manifests and with simple techniques they learn the participants get a tool with which they can help themselves in stressful situations. To the question, whether the use of knowledge they received at the anti-stress program, can reduce stress, the participants answered with the average grade of 5.63 (Figure 5).

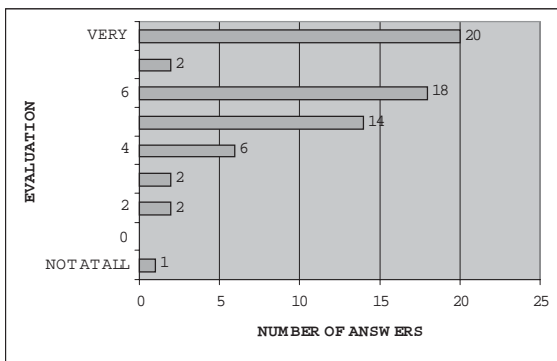


Figure 5: Opinion on the reduction of stress by using the knowledge obtained at the antistress program

To the question, if they felt more relaxed after executing the techniques they learned at the anti-stress program, the participants replied with the average grade 5.6. As much as 83% of the respondents answered this question with the grade

5 or more (Figure 6).

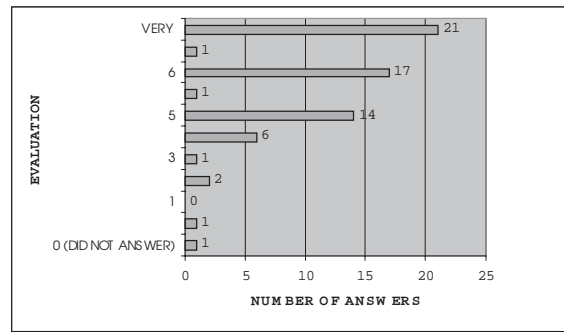


Figure 6: Evaluation of relaxation after the techniques

Stress influences the emotional state and health of a person. By using specific techniques we can influence stress and protect ourselves against unexpected stressful events. We can use these techniques already when stressful situations appear, or we can use them after stressful situations and thus influence our well-being and health. We asked the respondents whether they believed that the use of techniques influenced their health. They evaluated the influence of techniques on their health with the average grade 4.55 (Figure 7)

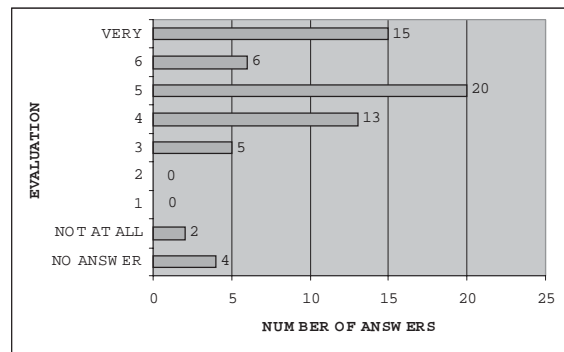


Figure 7: Evaluation of the influence of techniques on health

At the end of the questionnaire the participants were asked to give their suggestions how to improve the program. They were as follows:

Six participants thought that the antistress program was good or they have no comments. Others suggested that the stretching exercises should be performed in the morning; two suggested more movement; two participants thought that also the bosses should take part at the course; three participants suggested that they should be introduced to the contents of the course and the eastern spiritual tradition in more detail; three participants suggested an advanced course; two suggested revision of the course; one suggested that as many police officers as possible should take part at the course and that this form of training should also be organised in police administrations or closer to where they live.

4.3 Interpretation Of The Results

The participants evaluated the antistress program on the scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is very good and 5 very poor. The average grade was 1.49 and standard deviation 0.64. The evaluation was thus between very good and good. The reason is in simple but effective and tested techniques for stress reduction that are available to those who finish such training. The authors

wanted the research to confirm the results of the evaluation of the antistress program and to discover the reasons for such good or bad evaluation with additional questions that refer to the contents, implementation and recommendation of the antistress program to other participants. The answers to these questions undoubtedly confirm the very good evaluation of the antistress program, as all these three questions were evaluated with the average grade of over 6. Considering the results, the authors believe that the implementation of the programs was at an appropriate level, the contents were adapted to the needs of police officers and appropriate for the training in the field of preventive psycho-hygienic model. The stated results influenced also the recommendations to co-workers to take part at the anti-stress program. The police officers responded to the recommendations with their applications that exceeded, according to the data by Police Academy, the available places for the training in one group by several times. At the end of the program all participants were given instructions how to execute individual techniques at home. It depends on each individual, their needs, inclinations and possibilities, which techniques they use and how often. According to the results, most of the participants use the acquired knowledge. Only 5 participants out of 65 respondents answered that they did not use the acquired knowledge. The results show that the participants are aware that they are exposed to everyday stressful situations, that they recognise stress and know that they need to do something for their well-being and health and to use the techniques which reduce everyday tensions. There are several reasons why they do not use the acquired knowledge, but most often it is lack of time. The participants believe that Gotenica is appropriate for the implementation of such programs, since it is a quiet setting, the organisation is good, the team are friendly and the accommodation and diet are good. The time of the seminar was evaluated slightly worse. The reason for this was probably the fact that the participants of the first two groups took part at the seminar in their spare time and the seminar ended Monday evening. The participants answered with the average grade 5.63 and standard deviation 1.39 to the question, if the use of the acquired knowledge at the antistress program reduced stress. This grade is similar to the one for the next question, if the participants felt more relaxed after the techniques. They graded this question also with the average grade 5.6 and standard deviation 1.53. Similar is also the redistribution. The results of the questionnaire let us conclude that approximately one third of the participants believe that the use of the techniques they learned at the antistress program significantly influences their health. The authors assume that only those could notice this, who continued with the use the techniques and the acquired knowledge also after the anti-stress program at home.

Factor analysis of the questionnaire excluded three factors (Table 4):

Table 4 : Factor analysis

VARIABLE:	1	2	4
use of knowledge	.842		
sense of relaxation	.829		

evaluation of contents	.815
recommendation to others	.782
evaluation of influence on health	.641
evaluation of time of event	.572
evaluation of place of event	.528
evaluation of implementation	.524
bellows	.668
need to use the techniques	.668
once a week	.614
three-level breathing	.569
use of other knowledge	.640
use of knowledge several times a week	.618
use of techniques	.590

The first factor consists of variables which relate to the evaluation of the seminar, i.e.: use of knowledge, sense of relaxation, evaluation of contents, recommendation to others, evaluation of influence on health, evaluation of time of event, evaluation of place of event and the evaluation of implementation. The first factor could be called evaluation of anti-stress program. The second consists of variables relating to the breathing techniques used at the anti-stress program, i.e.: three-level breathing, bellows, healing breath and the need to use the techniques. The second factor could be called usefulness of breathing techniques. The third factor consists of variables relating to the use of knowledge, i.e.: use of other knowledge, use of knowledge several times a week and use of techniques. The third factor could be called use of knowledge and techniques in time.

5 Conclusion

After 6 anti-stress programs we designed a questionnaire with which we wanted to find out and intended to measure some opinions of the participants. The results of the questionnaire showed that a high percentage of the participants at the antistress program recommend the participation at the program also to their colleagues. The evaluations of the contents of the program, its implementation and practical use to reduce stress were very positive and confirm the need for such training. This is also a good enough reason to continue such training in the police and at the same time a motive for the organisers. By the autumn of 2002, 15 basic and one advanced course were executed, and altogether 327 employees of the police participated at them. The findings of the studies on the causes and consequences of stress show that people should be trained to become aware of stressful situations and to take adequate measures, in order reduce health hazard.

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A1- Appendix 1

Institute for Strengthening of Human Values is part of the international organisation **Art of Living Foundation (AOL)**, a non-profitable organisation which carries out antistress programs and self-realisation programs in more than 100 countries of the world. AOL is a non-government organisation (NGO) at ECO SOC United Nations Organisation and is official consultant for the World Health Organisation WHO. Its founder is Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, a spiritual teacher, who adapted his knowledge and wisdom at workshops to the needs of a modern man. In Slovenia the program for convicts was organised and financed by the Institute for Strengthening of Human Values. For the prison employees at the Ministry of Justice the antistress program was financed by the European Community (PHARE).