Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement

A Synopsis of Dr. Kevin M. Gilmartin
“A Guide for Officers and Their Families”
Journey Through Law Enforcement

- Idealistic recruits can become cynical veterans.
- The job can become all consuming.
- An individual can change their “world view” to accommodate perceived job parameters.
- Perception is driven by physiological and psychological demands.
Suicide is the greatest determinate in officer death (37%).

Depression, isolation, and withdrawal from society and loved ones indicates dysfunction in an officer's life.

Officers deny negative aspects of their jobs to justify continuing their careers.
Are the Changes Inevitable?

- Crises management can take on the form of “avoidance” of responsibility.
- Emotional survival for the average police officer is dependent on Agency awareness.
- Teaching a balanced life (police vs. personal lives) is a key task of leadership.
Over time Cops see the world differently.

In this new world view:
- Boy Scout Leaders become pedophiles
- Cynicism builds (everyone has hidden agendas)
- Bullshit predominates, almost everyone is morphed into an “asshole”!
Hypervigilance

- Definition: A world view based on a “threat based” biologically driven perspective in which everyday events unfold as potentially dangerous to officer safety.
- Citizens operate in a bounded context that only periodically assesses personal safety.
- Cops can become “hypervigilant” all the time.
Affect of Hypervigilance

- The Reticular Activating System (RAS) of the human brain determines one’s state of awareness.
- Heightened awareness stresses the autonomic nervous system by:
  - Increasing blood pressure
  - Respiration
  - Body temperature and other functions.
Affect cont’d

- Hypervigilance is manifested by:
  - Increased peripheral vision
  - Improved hearing
  - Faster reaction times
  - Increased blood sugar consumption
  - Elevated heart rate

- It produces a general “sense of energy” to meet and overcome threats to personal survival.
Affect cont’d

Hypervigilant

On Duty = Alive, Alert, Energetic, Involved, Humorous

Normal Range of Risk

Off Duty = Tired, Detached, Isolated, Apathetic
Affect cont’d

- Recovery from the On/Off Hypervigilant State normally takes 24 hours.

- Coping Mechanism:
  - *Magic Chair* = physically exhausted officers “crash” upon returning home and withdrawal into themselves to the exclusion of family, loved ones, and friends

- Hypervigilance is a cyclical, biologically driven energy change.
This biological condition is mistakenly interpreted to be a “mental” state.

Avoidance of this negative state is manifested by staying “on-duty” (overtime, police volunteer work, etc.) for as long as possible.

Unfortunately, overinvestment in a police career can destroy home life and family relationships.
Behaviors associated with Hypervigilance include:

- The desire to remain socially isolated at home
- An unwillingness to engage in conversation or activities that are not police related
- Reduced interaction with non-police friends and acquaintances
- Procrastination in decision making not related to work
- Infidelity
- Noninvolvement in children's needs and activities
- The “I usta” Syndrome - loss of interest in hobbies and or recreational activities.
Long Term Affects

- Being a police officer can overwhelm significant aspects of one’s life.
- Police officers have limited control over their professional career.
  - Bosses, external stakeholders, politicians, laws, regulations, etc. diminish perception of control
  - The more one feels “out-of-control” the greater the chance officers sees themselves as victims
- Limited control also can lead one to acquire an entitlement mindset that is justified by a feeling of being “screwed” by the powers-that-be.
“Victims” exhibit the following behaviors:

- Merged professional and personal roles
- Hypersensitivity to change
- Rigidity and inflexibility
- Ever present feeling of being threatened and/or persecuted
- Need to retaliate against the power structure
- Social isolation from fellow workers (except a chosen few “believers”)
- Grandiose sense of Self Importance
- Exaggerated perception of past accomplishments
- Internalized sense of entitlement.
Values in Conflict

- Core “Guardian/Protector” values of duty, honor, etc. are challenged when one becomes a helpless victim.

- Situational based “Trader” values are substituted that allow for justification of negative behavior (he screwed me, I can screw him back).
Acts

- Acts of Omission = I choose to not “enforce the law” become...
- Acts of Commission = continuum of dysfunction moves to conscious violation of agency rules, regulations and SOPs.
Coping

Move from a **Victim Orientation** (I have little control over my professional life) to a **Survivor Orientation** (I can control my personal life).

- Police live in a “reactive” world – I respond to crime
- Officers can create a “proactive” world in which I plan my home life around core values of family, loving and caring.
Gilmartin’s Survivor Tools

- Time Management – apply the same planning skills one uses on the job to gain control over precious personal time
- Physical Fitness – working out expunges the biological stressors that impede recovery from the Hypervigilant state
- Financial Independence – consume less and focus on family needs more

Control what you can control, release yourself from what you can not control.
Testing Hypervigilance

- Concept based on Walter Cannon (1920) and Han Seyles (1940) original work on General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS)
- GAS is a “general alarm reaction” to external stimuli.
- It consists of three phases:
  - Alarm Reaction = mobilize resources
  - Resistance = cope with stressor
  - Exhaustion = reserves depleted
- Coping (Optimists deal with stress better then Pessimists).
- Constant stress presents physiological and psychological damage.
Critical Questions:
- Is “Hypervigilance” a “unique” cop mental state unknown by other professionals?
- What can cops learn from other stressful professions?
- Can the knowledge that humans cope with stress (no matter their profession or cultural context) the same way be used to “bridge” the police and citizen worldviews?

Outcome: All stakeholders increase understanding and enhance communication.