

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.

Officer Survival

- Suicide is the greatest determinate in officer death (37%).
- Depression, isolation, and withdrawal from society and loved ones indicates dysfunction in an officers 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.

[What is Actually Taking Place]

- 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.

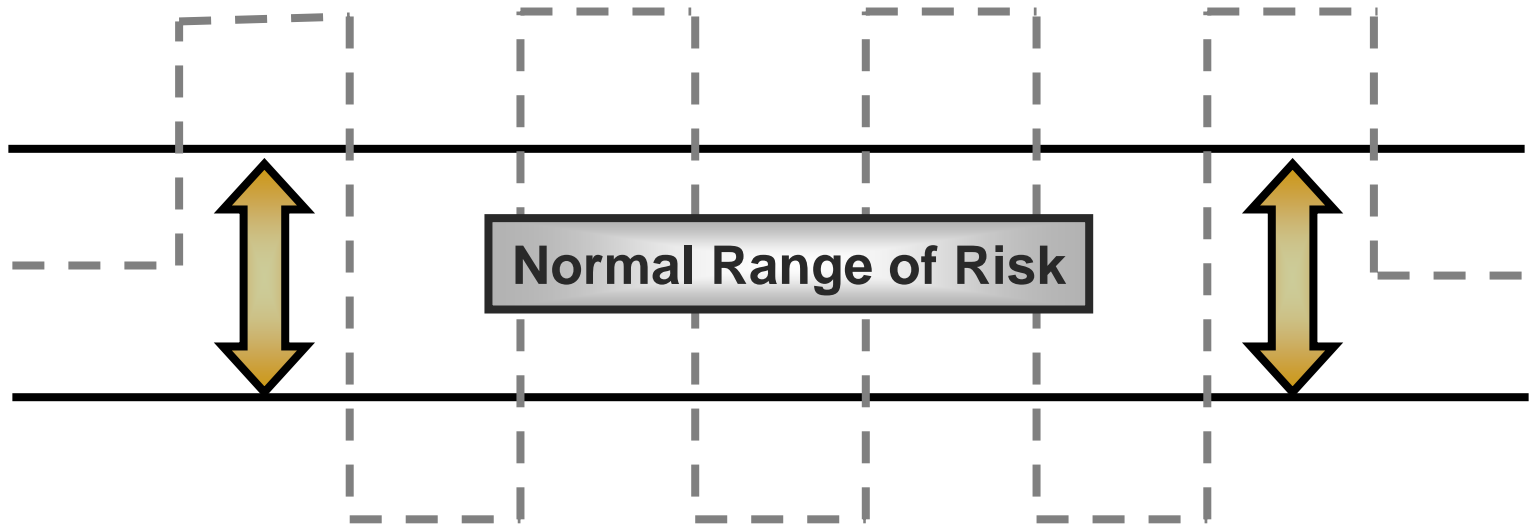
[Affect cont'd]

- 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



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.

[Affect cont'd]

- 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.

[Symptoms]

- 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.

[Victimization]

- “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.

[Coping cont'd]

- 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.

[Reference]

Gilmarin, K.M. (2002). *Emotional Survival for law enforcement: A guide for officers and their families*. Tucson, AZ: E-S Press. ISBN 0-9717254-0-3

[Testing Hypervigilance]

- Concept based on Walter Cannon (1920) and Han Selye (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 than Pessimists).
- Constant stress presents physiological and psychological damage.

[Testing cont'd]

- 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.