

Emotional Survival

The high-intensity psychological and emotional level of alertness and aggressiveness first responders need to stay safe and survive on the job is referred to as *hyper-vigilance*. First responders are trained to be constantly aware, always on guard, and to consistently seek out and evaluate potential threats. The hyper-vigilant state is necessary on the job, but cannot be easily turned on and off like a switch. Going back and forth from work to home can wreak havoc on the nerves, making it impossible to sleep or relax. Because a hyper-vigilant attitude is so ingrained in the work itself, it is one of the most difficult aspects of the job to overcome in one's personal life.

As Kevin Gilmartin, Ph.D. describes in his popular book, "Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement," this intensely elevated level of alertness causes an automatic neuro-physiological reaction in the mind and body after leaving work. In order for a first responder's mind and body to return to the normal functioning range, the body produces an equally intense opposite reaction to bring them down from this hyper-vigilant state.

In other words, while at work first responders are extraordinarily alert, alive, perceptive, active, constantly making decisions, and engaged in their task. When they go home, where they no longer need to be hyper-vigilant, their minds and bodies are naturally exhausted. Emergency first responders tend to not want to make decisions or become interested in others in their downtime, which can lead to their becoming isolated, apathetic and detached. Unfortunately the down side of the hyper-vigilant cycle also decreases the metabolic rate, often causing first responders to gain weight.

Gilmartin has found that normally it takes about 24 hours for the mind and body to recover and return to their normal functioning range. However, by then the first responder is already back at work in full hyper-vigilant mode once again. By the weekend they are so run down from this rollercoaster that it can take most of their days off to recover. If not properly managed, the hyper-vigilant cycle can have a devastating effect on a first responder's quality of life, emotional wellness and personal relationships over the course of a career.

It is imperative that first responders develop certain practices and conscious mechanisms that turn their thoughts and reactions while off duty into a more socially conforming approach to their personal lives. It is less a matter of "turning off" the first responder mindset than "turning on" and "tuning into" a civilian mindset, where they enjoy the company of people closest to them and see others as benign and not as a threat.

Law enforcement agencies in particular train their officers to be cynical about everything, as well as distrustful of human nature and people's motives. That worldview is essential in order for officers to keep safe and to stay alive on the job. However, what's essential for physical survival at work can often become devastating to first responders' home lives and emotional well-being.

If a spouse or children become "as strangers," it is because the first responder has estranged them by allowing the negative aspects of their profession to emotionally separate them from those they need most. When first responders treat the good people in their lives in a similar fashion to those they encounter on the street while on-duty, they

cause alienation from those who could provide a lifeline of support and critical care for them.

Human nature and the motives of the people who are close to first responders are essentially good. First responders must learn how *not* to see everyone as a criminal; how *not* to be distrustful of family, friends and children; and to realize that 98% of the people in the world are basically law-abiding citizens who are not out to harm others.

Unfortunately, many first responders tend to make poor choices in order to try to maintain the good feelings of the hyper-vigilant state. They do this by not going home, working an unusual amount of overtime, drinking away from home with colleagues, engaging in promiscuity, and other high-risk behaviors. They unfortunately tend to become less invested in their family relationships and less interested in doing the things they used to enjoy. And a consistent state of apathy, isolation, fatigue, and detachment can lead to depression or substance abuse.

Female emergency first responders have even greater challenges to survive emotionally. Wives and mothers are very rarely given the opportunity to come home and just unwind, or do something solely for themselves and their own well-being. Because female emergency first responders are far more susceptible to suffering emotional trauma during their career, it is even more critical that they aggressively take control of their wellness practices and to tell their families what they need in order to allow the hyper-vigilant cycle to balance itself. They cannot ignore what their spirit and emotional well-being are craving, but learn to solicit the help of their loved ones to assist them in maintaining consistent emotional survival practices, time alone, and nurturing care.

It is imperative for *all* emergency first responders to recognize and come to terms with the hyper-vigilant cycle that is inherent in their professions. They cannot escape it or pretend it doesn't affect them; but they can certainly proactively manage it and prevent it from causing them irreparable harm.

Following the preceding 10 emotional wellness methods will inherently assist you in managing the hyper-vigilance cycle and to maintain your interest, energy, and activity in life:

1. Control of Personal Time:

- **Personal Time Management Techniques:** If plans are not made well in advance, then you are allowing work and emotional stress to control your time. Aggressively and proactively plan ahead for off-duty family and personal time *before* days off, and before the end of shift. If plans are not written and scheduled, they are far less likely to happen. So, write plans down, and schedule those things in advance that nurture your spirit and show loved ones that they are the most important part of your day.
- **Maintain hobbies and interests:** Socialize with friends outside of your profession. Continue to not only participate in activities that you've always enjoyed, but search for new opportunities to be active and involved in life. It's critical to fight the urge to become isolated and detached, while doing nothing during time off.
- **Keep personal life separate from the job:** Your personal life does not just take care of itself. If left unattended, it will deteriorate. Take responsibility to maintain, nurture, and enjoy your personal life. Your personal life is, in fact, your "real" life, and should only be complemented by your job as a first responder. Rather than passively allowing work

stress and demands to control your true life, learn to live for time away from work where you can breathe life into your spirit and renew your emotional wellness.

- Show your love by specific behavior and quality time spent with loved ones: Show the loved ones in your life how much you value them – don't just tell them. Family members need to know how important they are to you; this is something you demonstrate in different ways each day by how often and the way you talk with them, what you do with them, and how much you include them in your life.

2. Live Life as a Survivor-Not a Victim:

- Do not allow the job to drain the life out of you or to turn your attitude into bitterness, anger, frustration, and apathy. The job should be life-affirming. First responders work in a profession that few are entrusted to perform; they protect and give life to others so that everyone can live in security and peace. First responders affect people's lives every day with the potential for good (or a positive interaction) with every contact made.
- Focus only on what you can control: You can only control your own integrity, how hard you work, your own attitude, your reactions to things, your compassion and professionalism. Most stress in life is caused by resisting, suppressing, or fighting those things that really can't be controlled no matter what is done. Learn to accept those things that you have no control over and practice letting go. Accept what is, while striving to positively and constructively improve things, or at least your reaction and attitude toward things that can't be changed. Focus attention and energy on living in the present moment, not wasted on guilt or regret, or anxiety about the future. Letting go of negative emotions will not only lead to peace, but will help you to focus on positive steps that can be taken.

- Develop the habit of asking a constructive question behind the issue that is making you feel like a victim. Rather than excessively complaining and becoming bitter and cynical, ask yourself questions like; “What can I do to positively change the situation?” “How can I not allow this to adversely affect me?” “What can I do to improve things?” Then, take control and work to constructively improve the situation.
- Live in the present moment: One habit of those who seem to thrive is to live in the present moment, neither dwelling on the past nor living in the future. Learn to forgive yourself, make up for past wrongs the best you are able, and move forward in the present moment constructively. Work on what you can proactively do in the here and now to improve your circumstances, become more emotionally well, and to enjoy life as it is while letting negative emotions go. Try not to resist current circumstances, but find ways that you can positively influence them without trying to control events or other people.

3. Relate to the True Purpose of your Profession:

- First responders are the good in society, who fight evil and those who prey upon the innocent. They are the only ones who keep society in order and allow for the continuance of our way of life. There is an inherent nobility and honor in all of the emergency first responder professions. Our nation and community needs you to be emotionally and spiritually well in order to provide the essential services of protection.
- Focus on what the community, agency, fellow officers and others need from you and how you can fulfill those needs-*not* what you need or want from them.
- Every time a police officer arrests someone, unknown numbers of people will be prevented from becoming victims. An officer prevents literally thousands of persons

from becoming victimized throughout the course of their careers.

4. Physical Fitness Should Become a Way of Life:

- A consistent physical fitness program is a basic requirement for emotional survival. Physical fitness can aggressively facilitate the hyper-vigilant cycle toward balance of emotional and social interaction. It helps mitigate the low effects of the hyper-vigilant cycle. 30-40 minutes of aerobic activity at least 3-4 times a week helps to uplift you from being tired, detached, apathetic, or depressed. Physical activity will help you get more consistent sleep and will raise metabolism rates that will keep you from gaining weight. Both are essential for over-all wellness. It will also serve to keep you interested in staying active.

5. Proactively Control Your Finances:

- If you need to consistently work overtime to pay the mortgage and utilities, then your debt and financial obligations have total control over you. Your goal should be to resist further irrational spending and whittle away at debt. Practice living within your means and your stress will be significantly reduced.

6. Consistently Get Restful, Uninterrupted Sleep:

- In 2007, the Harvard School of Medicine conducted a sleep deprivation research study of 5,000 police officers and reported their findings in the Journal of the American Medical Association. The research study continued to assess the officer's on-duty performance for the following two years. The study found that 40 percent of the officers surveyed reported undiagnosed sleep disorders (sleep apnea, insomnia, sleep deprivation). The prevalence of sleep disorders in officers showed a corresponding

significant adverse effect on their over-all health, including increased diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, depression, burn out, and other emotional disorders.

- Officers with sleep disorders were 25 percent more likely to express uncontrolled anger to a suspect or citizen, and were 35 percent more likely to have a citizen complaint filed against them.
- Sleep-deprived officers had 51 percent greater odds of falling asleep while driving on duty.
- One in three officers have sleep apnea-waking up repeatedly because breathing has temporarily stopped. That's at least 8 times higher than the rate among the general population and is a serious condition. The surprisingly high incidents of sleep apnea have grave implications for officers and their agencies. This sleeping disorder taxes the heart because the sudden jolts of waking up are accompanied by a surge of adrenalin. This is believed to be a cause for an increase in cardiovascular disease. Officers with sleep apnea have 90 percent greater odds of cardiovascular disease, even when adjusted for their age, sex, body mass index, smoking and other risk factors.
- Officers with sleep apnea also had much higher risk of diabetes (61 percent), depression (150 percent), emotional burnout (270 percent) and risk of falling asleep while driving home from work (126 percent).
- 25% of all officers in the study reported falling asleep at the wheel once or twice a month. "Drowsy driving" may help explain why car accidents have overtaken criminal assaults as the second leading cause of death among police officers—suicide being the first.
- The most effective way to prevent sleep disorders is for officers to exercise

consistency; eat properly; not voluntarily work excessive hours; and especially not abuse alcohol, caffeine, or energy drinks. It will also serve to keep you interested in staying active.

7. Plan for Retirement From the Beginning of Your Career:

- It's crucial for emergency first responders to be thinking about and planning their retirement consistently, from the moment they are hired and throughout their career. A major emotional trap for first responders is that they tend to strongly identify with their job; and when the job is gone, often their self-identity and reason for living are gone. Your job can disappear at any given moment due to injury or a number of other unforeseen circumstances. Having a plan financially, as well as for activity and interests beyond your first responder career helps to keep one grounded and focused on the continuation of life beyond the career.
- From the earliest moment and continuing throughout your career, you should take advantage of deferred compensation plans or other savings and retirement plans. You need to plan for not being able to work, and to remain active in life beyond the job. Many first responder suicides and other emotional suffering significantly intensify shortly after retirement or after becoming disabled, often because there was no prior preparation or planning. Without long term preparation, one can easily find themselves feeling lost, disconnected with life, and emotionally desolate as they struggle to find a purpose in life beyond work.
- Review retirement plans each year at the anniversary date of being hired. Work towards realistic retirement objectives while still working. Always have a goal in sight.

8. Eliminate or Reduce Alcohol Consumption/ Other Substance Abuse:

- There are few things that first responders do that cause more potential serious problems for their career, family, and emotional survival than abusing alcohol or any other substance. The choices made as a result of drinking, the adverse effects on your quality of life, work, and health—all make it more difficult to effectively maintain the wellness of your spirit. If drinking or consuming any other substance is felt and believed to be a “need”, then you are abusing it. Drinking because it is perceived to be needed in order to relax, to sleep, to have a good time, to forget, to deal with your spouse, or any other need is a major red flag and a potential serious problem could be developing. Substance intoxication only works to exacerbate the hyper-vigilant condition, hindering the body’s own natural mechanisms to re-adjust. Symptoms of PTSD and feelings of depression, despair, or hopelessness, will only ultimately intensify with drinking over the long term.

Drinking in moderation may be alright; however, the problem is most first responders have no idea what drinking in moderation really is. The bottom line, if you feel you need to do it and you can’t limit it or stop when you try, then it’s harming you.

9. Resist the Maladaptive Coping Escape of Promiscuity:

- Many first responders tend to turn toward promiscuous sexual behavior as an escape or in order to maintain the euphoric feeling of the hyper-vigilant cycle. Similar to excessive drinking and substance abuse, promiscuous behavior is a sign of deeper emotional problems and issues that aren’t being dealt with in a constructive manner.

These behaviors demonstrate poor coping abilities that need to be recognized and addressed.

Incidents of promiscuous behavior tend to increase with PTSD and other emotional issues, as well as chronic problems trying to deal with the hyper-vigilant cycle. This can often become devastating to one's family, career, and especially to one's own emotional survival and well-being. Ultimately in the long term there tends to be significant emotional cost with regret, guilt, loss of integrity, and loss of self-respect.

10. Practice Relaxation Techniques/ Meditation and Visualization:

- Along with the emotional trauma and acute stress of a first responder's job, there always seems to be incessant demands and distractions that weigh heavily upon your spirit. Without taking time to practice relaxation and stress-reduction techniques consistently, it is very difficult to overcome the hyper-vigilant cycle. Zoning out in front of the television or computer screen actually does very little to alleviate stress and only tends to mask underlying pressures. To promote the nervous system's relaxation response there needs to be a mentally active process that leaves the body relaxed, calm, centered within, and focused.

Consistently practicing relaxation techniques reduces stress symptoms by: slowing your heart rate, lowering blood pressure, slowing your breathing rate, increasing blood flow to major muscles, reducing muscle tension and chronic pain, improving concentration, reducing anger and frustration, and boosting confidence to handle problems.

Healthy, effective methods of relaxation involve a short, specific time period where one focuses on relaxing and reducing stress. Effective methods include:

- **Meditation:** When you catch yourself feeling pressure and thinking about your job, your relationships or your endless to-do list, practice letting the thoughts escape while stilling yourself and sitting quietly free of all distractions, with your eyes closed taking slow, deep breaths for about 5-10 minutes. One form of meditation is sitting in silence and focusing your thoughts on peaceful memories, good and positive thoughts and feelings, or creatively visualizing yourself calm and at peace. Meditating upon awakening for 5-10 minutes is a great way to start the day more relaxed, focused, and centered upon what you would like to achieve that day. The idea is to take your mind off your stress, and replace it with an image that evokes a sense of calm. The more realistic your visualization is in terms of colors, sights, sounds; even touch and feel-the more relaxation you'll experience.

Some people of faith find it useful to use meditation each day for a few minutes to connect with the source of unlimited hope, inspiration, and purpose. Spiritual mediation and prayer connects one to a higher calling-an inner purpose to life that sustains, heals, and offers peace and resilience.

- **Music:** Music can calm the heartbeat and soothe the soul, report experts. When things get rough, take a musical stress detour by aligning your heartbeat with the slow tempo of a relaxing song-even classical music. Research shows that listening to 30 minutes of classical music may produce calming effects equivalent to taking 10 mg of Valium.

- **Visualization:** While sitting quietly for 5-10 minutes with your eyes closed hold a mental image of a positive outcome to a problem, a peaceful place you have visited or would like to visit, or “see” in your mind’s eye the stress leaving your body. Creatively visualize anything that helps you to relax and calm your breathing.
- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** While sitting comfortably with your eyes closed in silence, focus on slowly tensing and then relaxing each muscle group starting with your toes and slowly working your way to your neck and face. This helps you become aware of physical sensations while focusing on the difference between muscle tension and relaxation. Tense your muscles for at least five seconds and then relax for 30 seconds, and repeat. Do this while breathing deeply and slowly.
- **Tactical Breathing/ Deep Breathing:** This technique can be practiced anywhere at any time. It has been shown to immediately reduce stress symptoms and can help alleviate certain symptoms of trauma. Practice inhaling slowly and very deeply through your nose with as large of a breath you can intake. Hold your breath for a count of 4, then slowly release all of the air through your mouth. Repeat this four times.

Emotional wellness and management of the hyper-vigilant cycle are vital to remain resilient, interested and active in life, healthy, and energized. By practicing these 10 emotional survival methods you will be taking control over your ability to enhance coping skills and to survive your profession in a healthy manner.