

**EFFECTS OF  
HYPERVIGILANCE ON LAW  
ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS**

MO Sheriff's Association  
Spring Conference, 2021  
Tuesday, March 9, 2021

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**TRAINING INSTRUCTOR FOR  
THIS PRESENTATION**

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**MAIN SOURCE DOCUMENT FOR  
THIS PRESENTATION**

- **Emotional Survival For Law Enforcement**
  - **A Guide for Officers and Their Families**
  - **By Kevin M. Gilmartin, Ph.D.**
    - Available through E-S Press, Inc.  
8340 North Thornydale Road #110-314  
Tucson, Arizona 85741

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### EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE ON LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS

- ▣ The journey through law enforcement begins...
- ▣ Why the choice of law enforcement as a career..??
- ▣ What is hypervigilance..??
- ▣ What are the effects of hypervigilance..??
- ▣ "Running the Race" / Being an "emotional survivor" of a law enforcement career

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### EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE – COURSE OBJECTIVES

- ▣ Define the term "hypervigilance";
- ▣ Identify the eleven (11) functions of the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system which is affected by hypervigilance and recognize how these functions optimize officer safety while on-duty;

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### EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE – COURSE OBJECTIVES

- ▣ Compare the responses of the sympathetic (on-duty) and the parasympathetic (off-duty) branches of the autonomic nervous system and how they each affect the opposites ends of the hypervigilance cycles in officers' lives;
- ▣ Identify four (4) effects of the hypervigilance cycle as it affects officers' personal / social lives outside of their workplace;

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### EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE – COURSE OBJECTIVES

- Identify the “magic chair phenomena” and how it can start a process of deterioration in the quality of relationships between police officers and those persons central to their personal lives;
- Identify four (4) attributes that can be incorporated into the personal lives of law enforcement officers, which can assist them in countering the negative effects of hypervigilance.

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### THE JOURNEY THROUGH LAW ENFORCEMENT BEGINS...

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### THE JOURNEY THROUGH LAW ENFORCEMENT

- For almost all law enforcement officers, their careers began from a position of enthusiasm, motivation and idealism.
- Each time officers put on the uniform and assume the police role, a sense of alertness, aliveness and quick decision making becomes the biological and psychological world of the on-duty police officer—this is hypervigilance.
- Cops think well on their feet—hypervigilance sees to that.

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### THE JOURNEY THROUGH LAW ENFORCEMENT

- For many young officers, the feeling has a recreational sense about it.
- Many veteran officers who leave police work for whatever reason, return to the job with the following explanation for their return to the field:

“Cop work gets in your blood.”

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### THE JOURNEY THROUGH LAW ENFORCEMENT

- New officers are often experiencing this reaction for the first time in their lives...in many cases they will tell you:  
    **“I just can’t get enough of doing this job.”**
- New officers say that for the first few years, anyway....
- But the journey over the years from new recruit to experienced officer produces changes within the officer.

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### THE JOURNEY THROUGH LAW ENFORCEMENT

- As a new officer’s career continues, they learn to rely almost exclusively on the support and friendship of other officers, a tendency that begins during the intense bonding at the academy.
- Officers don’t make conscious decisions to abandon old friendships—they just seem to fade away.

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### THE JOURNEY THROUGH LAW ENFORCEMENT

- As the years of law enforcement careers progress, officers can experience social isolation from *everyone*, except other cops.
- At the end of their first year, officers may find themselves distant and alienated from social networks and friendships that existed prior to joining the force.

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### THE JOURNEY THROUGH LAW ENFORCEMENT

- As the job takes on more and more of the officer's time and becomes more than just a job—it can become the central and defining aspect of the officer's life.
- Without insight into these changes, the significant people in officers' personal lives find themselves pushed aside, searching for a way to adapt to these changes or risk losing relationships.

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### HYPERVIGILANCE

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### HYPERVIGILANCE

- DEFINITION OF HYPERVIGILANCE:
- **Hypervigilance** is the necessary manner of viewing the world from a threat-based perspective, having the mindset to see the events unfolding as potentially hazardous.

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### HYPERVIGILANCE

- Officers **must** learn to see the world differently than most folks in order to increase the odds of going home each day after work.
- From the first day and throughout their entire career, officers must learn to perceive the world as potentially hazardous in order to survive the streets.
- Very few careers create hypervigilance in the work force. Very few careers have workers who begin their careers with such enthusiasm.

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### “STREET” SURVIVAL

- “Street Survival” training works
  - Since 1970, law enforcement felony deaths have been on the decline consistently each year, until recent years
  - Number of officers policing the United States has grown significantly over the past five decades
  - The direct result of good cops practicing effective officer safety

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**HYPERVIGILANCE**

- Permits *on-duty* officers to develop the perceptual set required for maximum officer safety.
- Every decision made is dependent on the perceptual set of hypervigilance.
- Each action taken is controlled by the perceptual set of hypervigilance.
- This perceptual set soon becomes officers ways of perceiving the world.

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**HYPERVIGILANCE**

- Hypervigilance should be ever present in effective and safe law enforcement officers.
- Permits them to lower the potential risks to which they are exposed.
- Most people outside of police work do not need to develop a perceptual set of hypervigilance.

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**HYPERVIGILANCE**

- Average citizen = average level of risk
- Citizens experience a “normal range” of emotion, risk and reactivity to their daily environment.
- They have NO NEED to see the world as potentially threatening.

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### HYPERVIGILANCE—UPPER PHASE (SYMPATHETIC)

**Hypervigilance**

On Duty

*Alive, Alert, Energetic, Involved, Humorous*

Normal Range of Risk

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### HYPERVIGILANCE

- How do citizens interpret hypervigilance..??
- Citizens observing hypervigilance many times in on-duty officers cannot understand why officers acted in the manner in which they did, during any given encounter.
- They perceive officers' actions as "rude", "unfriendly" or "very serious".

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### HYPERVIGILANCE

- Hypervigilance is a *biological state*.
- Its foundation is in the neurological functioning of the brain.
- Whenever the brain interprets the existence of a potential for threat or risk, the brain engages its higher functioning levels into a heightened level of awareness and perceptiveness of the surrounding environment.

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### HYPERVIGILANCE

- ▣ This response is meant to increase survival by enabling the brain to perceive potential threats before they take place.
  
- ▣ The increased level of alertness and awareness needed for officers to safely work in their environment is caused by the hypervigilance response and produces an increased functioning of the sympathetic branch of the *autonomic nervous system*.

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### AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

- ▣ *Autonomic nervous system* controls the body's internal organs and automatic functions.
  
- ▣ These include:
  - ▣ Pulse
  - ▣ Respiration
  - ▣ Body temperature
  - ▣ Blood pressure

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### AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

- ▣ The autonomic nervous system is the biological aspect of an officer's "sixth sense"—that capacity to be ready when something happens which needs immediate reaction.
  
- ▣ This reaction may be the reaction that keeps an officer alive in a life-threatening or critical situation.

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### AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

- The autonomic nervous system is divided into two (2) separate and very opposite branches:
  - Sympathetic (on-duty)
  - Parasympathetic (off-duty)
- The sympathetic branch is the part of the autonomic nervous system that reacts and controls bodily functions in times of challenge or threat.

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### AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

- This biological state of hypervigilance is the body's way of increasing survival through heightened functions:
  - Increased peripheral vision
  - Improved hearing
  - Faster reaction times
  - Increased blood sugar
  - Elevated heart rate
  - Increased blood pressure
  - Increased energy—general sense to meet and overcome any threats challenging the body's capacity to survive

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### EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

- This state of alert interaction with the environment, at mild to moderate levels, is not unpleasant to experience physically—at least for the first few years of their career.
- Officers experiencing hypervigilance interpret it as a unique feeling that comes about when they begin working in any potentially threatening environment.

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### EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

- Hypervigilance is one of the reasons that police relationships become quite intense and the culture is close-knit, is that officers share this biological state and it becomes the glue of the law enforcement culture.
- Officers also display good senses of humor—good, but usually rather “sick”.

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### EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

- When officers are engaged in police-related activities, they experience hypervigilance.
- Hypervigilance is the filter through which officers experience the world...ALL situations are potentially lethal; all situations require attention, alertness, involvement and quick intellectual assessment of the situation.

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### EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

- Since hypervigilance is a biologically-based action, then every action has an equal and opposite reaction.
- When officers go off-duty, the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system which controls on-duty reactions necessary for survival, gives way to the **parasympathetic** branch, controlling off-duty reactions.

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### HYPERVIGILANCE—UPPER PHASE (SYMPATHETIC)

**Hypervigilance**

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

**Normal Range of Risk**

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### EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

- Alert, alive, engaged, quick-thinking individuals while “on-duty”, change into detached, withdrawn, tired and apathetic individuals within their “off-duty” personal lives.
- The working officer who socially engages other individuals and practices alert and alive officer safety skills while on-duty, can have trouble responding to a normal conversation at home while off-duty.
- Most common description:  
**“Off-duty couch potato”**

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### HYPERVIGILANCE—LOWER PHASE (PARASYMPATHETIC)

**Every Action Has an Equal and Opposite Reaction**

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

**Normal Range of Risk**

**Off Duty**  
*Tired, Detached, Isolated, Apathetic*

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### EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

- Friends, spouses or significant others who describe their police officer companions during the off-duty phase of life, often make these observations:
- "They're different now that they're a cop."
- "They never talk anymore."
- "They come home, sit in front of the TV and tune out the world."

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### EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

- The domestic partner is describing the lower phase of the hypervigilance cycle. Officers experiencing hypervigilance in many ways, live in two different worlds.
- One is typified by alertness, involvement, aliveness and social engagement.
- The other is typified by exhaustion, isolation, apathy and on occasion, unfortunately, anger.

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### THE "MAGIC CHAIR" PHENOMENA

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### THE "MAGIC CHAIR"

- ▣ Most police officers, male or female, single or married, have "magic chairs."
- ▣ They don't call them that by name, but nonetheless, they still possess them and use them on an almost daily basis.

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### THE "MAGIC CHAIR"

- ▣ What's "magic" about the chair?
- ▣ As soon as an officer sits in it after a day's work, by "magic", all their blood instantly turns into lead.

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### THE "MAGIC CHAIR"

- ▣ They can't talk...
- ▣ They can't answer even the most basic question asked by a family member...
- ▣ ...all they can do is sit and enter into a vegetative off-duty phase.
- ▣ Most frequently, the "magic chair" is operated in conjunction with an electronic device for enhanced effect.

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### VARIOUS FORMS OF THE “MAGIC CHAIR”

- ▣ “I’m watching television” mode
- ▣ “I’m on the computer” mode
- ▣ “I’m reading the newspaper” mode
- ▣ “I’m playing video games” mode
- ▣ “I’m taking a nap” mode
- ▣ “I’m just thinking about something” mode

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### THE “MAGIC CHAIR”

- ▣ Typically, sitting in the “magic chair” is not in itself a problem.
- ▣ It could however be considered a major problem if the officer resides with another life form....spouse, domestic partner, child or even a pet.
- ▣ Especially if the other life form might want to do something “outrageous”....like talk.
- ▣ The “magic chair” may be the first step in mastering the art of the “nonsense transmission”.

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### “MAGIC CHAIR”— NONSENSE TRANSMISSIONS

- ▣ “Sure, babe, we’ll talk about it later.”
- ▣ “Whatever you think is fine with me.”
- ▣ “Why don’t you kids go outside and play? I’ll look at your homework a little later.”
- ▣ “Sure, that sounds good.”
- ▣ “Sure, we’ll see.”
- ▣ “Yeah, maybe.”

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**“MAGIC CHAIR”—  
NONSENSE TRANSMISSIONS**

- The “nonsense transmission” is designed to keep the other person at arm’s length and give the appearance of social interaction without being overtly offensive toward the party wishing to interact.
- This action IS biologically based, but CAN be corrected if the officer and significant others know of its existence.
- If they don’t know, hard feelings, rejection, social isolation and failed relationships may be the consequences.

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**THE “MAGIC CHAIR”**

- Most officers use the “magic chair” to recover while in the lower phases of hypervigilance.
- How long will officers remain in their “magic chair”? Most will respond...  
**“Until I fall asleep.”**

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**EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE**

- The biological cycle created by hypervigilance can take over the day-to-day lives of officers and their families and destroy the fabric of their lives.
- The capacity to picture this cycle is essential to understanding the dynamics taking place at work and at home and to learn strategies to break the destructive effect the cycle (rollercoaster) can produce on officers and their families.

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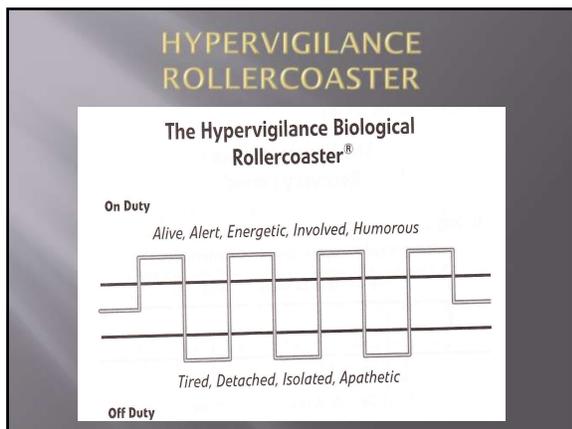
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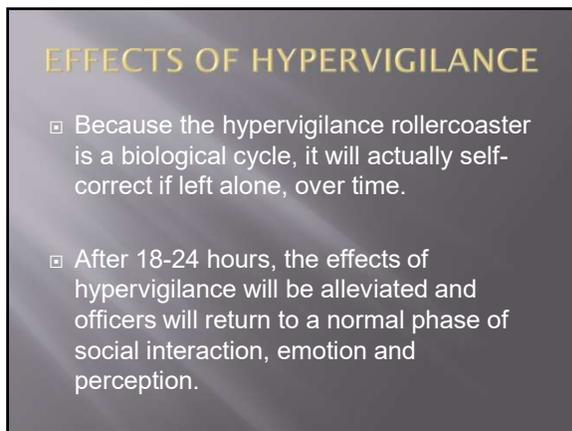
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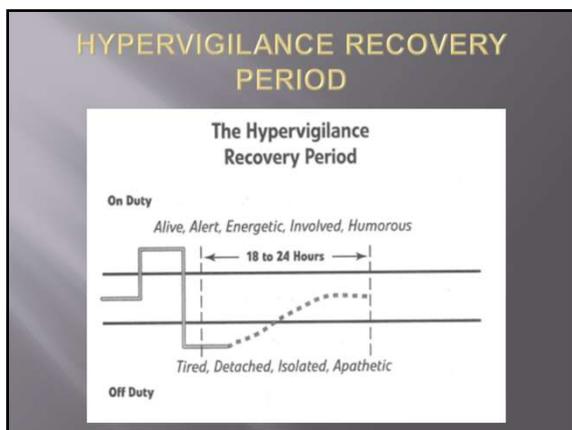
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## EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

- How do you break this cycle?
- Mistakenly, most officers decide:

“Don’t go home.”

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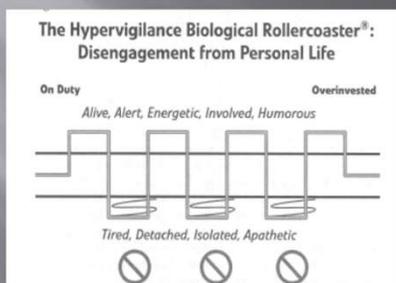
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## EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE



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## EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

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### EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

- ▣ **Develop a desire for social isolation at home**
  - Find themselves being non-communicative, withdrawn and apathetic concerning family activities
  - Assume their domestic partner will take care of all the “mundane” activities.....raising the kids, maintaining the home, paying bills, etc.
  - Riding the “magic chair”

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### EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

- ▣ **Unwillingness to engage in conversation or activities that are not police related**
  - Conversation revolves around “war stories” being told at law enforcement social functions
  - As each verbal exchange takes place and each story is told, officers listening vicariously experience the physiological reaction to returning to hypervigilance
  - Telling “war stories” and socializing with other officers gets the blood flowing
  - It has tremendous antidepressant effects.

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### EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

- ▣ **Reduced interaction with non-law enforcement friends and acquaintances**
  - Spending more time with other officers and other social encounters start to revolve around work become the social pattern to excluding old friends
  - Old friends live pretty mundane, boring lives
  - Only the feeling of being on the upper level of the hypervigilance cycle, either at work or while socializing with other officers, validates a feeling of aliveness or self-worth.

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### EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

- ▣ **Procrastination in decision making not related to work**
  - Withdrawing from decision making and self-initiated off-duty activities
  - Functioning in the upper phase of the hypervigilance cycle, wonderful decisions can be made while on-duty...but cannot or does not want to even even the most basic decisions while in the lower phases, when off-duty.

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### EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

- ▣ **Non-involvement in children's needs and activities**
  - In many law enforcement families, children interact with the officer parent only in the lower phases of the cycle
  - In many cases, officers don't recognize their non-involvement until children begin reaching high school graduation age / beginning their "own life", when they realize that they missed their own kids' childhood

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### EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

- ▣ **Infidelity**
  - One of the most painful aspects of the cycle
  - Anything associated with "home" or the lower phase of the cycle is boring
  - In order not to have to go home, they find a terribly destructive way not to go home....go to someone else's home
  - People bond with shared risk (learned in the academy and every day in a threatening environment)

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## EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

- The “I Usta” syndrome
  - Loss of interest in hobbies or recreational activities.
  - Generalized effect of the hypervigilance cycle on personal interests and non-police behaviors.
  - All activities that defined them before they became officers can be lost.
  - A new person emerges, many times without the balancing strengths of multiple dimensions, activities or roles in life to draw upon for perspective and understanding.

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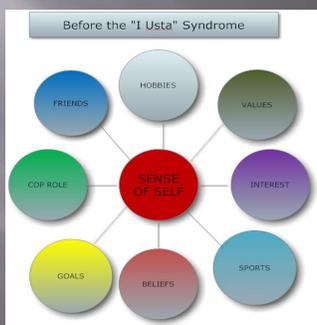
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## “I USTA” SYNDROME



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## “I USTA” SYNDROME

- “I usta” fish / hunt.
- “I usta” jog / work out.
- “I usta” go to church.
- “I usta” go camping with the family.
- “I usta” see old friends.
- “I usta” do woodworking.
- “I usta” keep my house picked up and tidy.
- “I usta” lay out my uniform the night before, so it looked sharp and I’d shine my leather.
- “I usta” take my kids to the park / read to my kids.
- “I usta” visit my folks.

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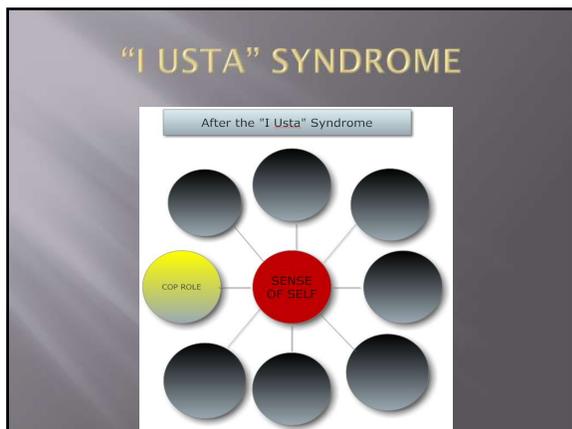
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### "I USTA" SYNDROME

- The "I usta" phase can deteriorate even further into more generalized senses of loss:
- "I usta" be married.
- "I usta" have a personal life.
- "I usta" give a damn about this job.

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### EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

- If officers have not been informed that the emotional and perceptual swing is something taking place biologically within them, they can mistakenly project responsibility for their emotions onto the home and those in their personal lives.
- Officers experience the down cycle repeatedly and don't know how to solve the issue because they don't know what is taking place.

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## EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

- WHICH OFFICERS ARE MOST AT RISK?
  - Your most dedicated, most committed, most highly motivated, one's practicing best hypervigilance and officer safety
  - Officers dedicated to being the best possible officers that they can be
  - They are trained in how to handle the streets, they aren't trained in how to handle the job and its effects on their personal lives

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## EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

- WHO IS THE FIRST VICTIM?
  - Officers are the first victims, although clearly many other people are affected by the loss of emotional and behavioral balance in officers' lives
  - As the number of non-police-related dimensions diminish, well-balanced individuals can be transformed into people who obtain the majority of their social and emotional needs from the police role

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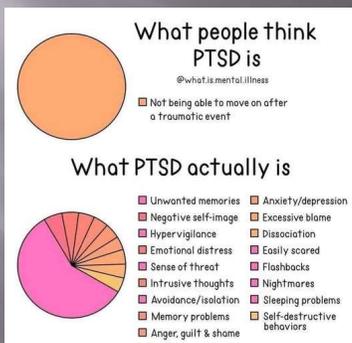
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## EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE



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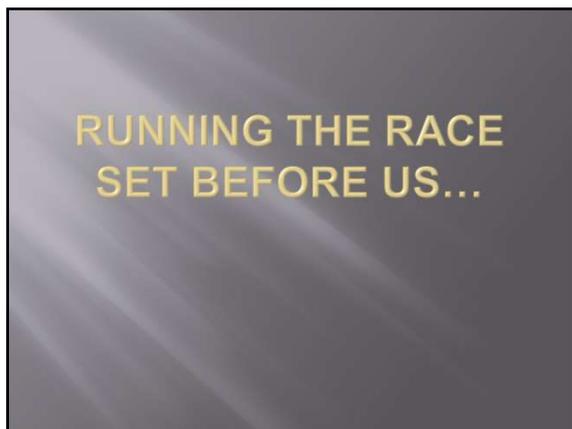
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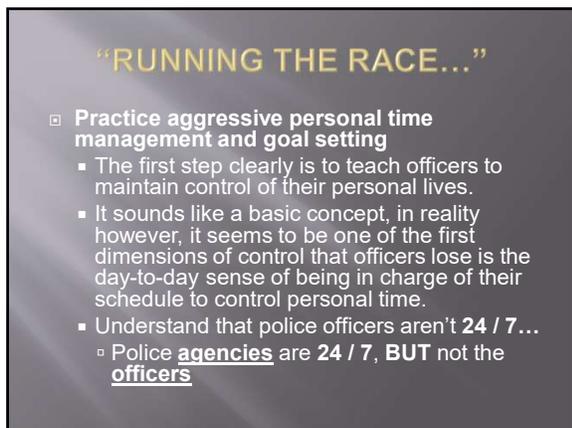
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### “RUNNING THE RACE...”

- **Practice physical fitness**
  - The second major element is to education officers that physical fitness moves the off-duty officer out of the lower phase of the hypervigilance cycle.
  - Also possesses significant stress-reducing components, gives officers a sense of relaxation, as well as conditions muscular flexibility and cardiovascular endurance.

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### “RUNNING THE RACE...”

- **Practice physical fitness**
- **What kind of exercise?**
  - 30-40 minutes of moderate aerobic exercise, 4-5 times per week
  - This level of exercise raises the bottom portion of the biological rollercoaster back within the normal limits

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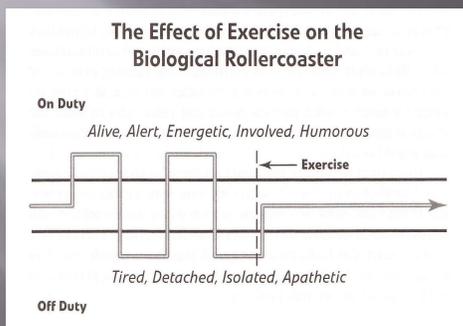
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77

### PRACTICE PHYSICAL FITNESS



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78

### “RUNNING THE RACE...”

- **Control their financial well-being**
  - One surprising aspect of physical fitness appears to be that officers who practice physical fitness also appear to be more stable financially.
  - They avoid “Retail Therapy”
    - Stress-related consumerism cycle
    - Distinct gender differences

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79

### RETAIL THERAPY

- Women—“small ticket” purchases, that can be absorbed within the next budget cycle.
- Items purchased are normally:
  - Purses
  - Shoes
  - Jewelry
  - Clothes
  - Manicure / pedicure / massages

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80

### RETAIL THERAPY

- Men—“BIG TICKET” purchases, that may take many, MANY budget cycles to be absorbed.
- Items purchased are normally:
  - Boats
  - Motorcycles
  - Motor homes / RVs
  - Firearms
  - Power tools
  - ATVs / ORVs / 4x4's

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81

**RETAIL THERAPY**

- How long does this “good feeling” of making a “BIG TICKET” purchase last..??  
**“Until the first payment is made.”**
- How many payments are there to be made..??  
**“Several years worth.”**

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82

**RETAIL THERAPY**

- How are those payments going to be made considering the purchase is not easily absorbed within the routine family budget cycle..??
- “Work a few extra off-duty jobs or grab as much overtime as possible to make the payments.”**

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83

**“RUNNING THE RACE...”**

- Maintain multiple roles in their lives**
  - One of the most difficult aspects of being a law enforcement officer is the need to find the balance being a highly effective officer and at the same time, an available spouse, parent and friend outside of the law enforcement role.
  - Teaching officers that the capacity to balance multiple significant emotional roles in one’s life is the central defining aspect of being emotional prepared for a long-term career in the law enforcement profession.

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84

**“RUNNING THE RACE...”**

▣ **Maintain multiple roles in their lives**

- Avoid the “victim mentality” and understand that officers control their personal lives, they do not necessarily control their law enforcement lives. Many factors control their law enforcement lives:
  - Agency administration or management;
  - Agency policies & procedures;
  - Elected officials;
  - The courts;
  - The Constitution.

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85

**“RUNNING THE RACE...”**

▣ **Maintain multiple roles in their lives**

- They remember the two (2) MOST IMPORTANT rules:
  - This is a **CAREER**, not a *CRUSADE*...
  - Make it a **MARATHON**, not a *SPRINT*...

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86

**EFFECTS OF HYPERVIGILANCE ON LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS**

Questions?

Comments?

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87

**A "MUST READ" FOR OFFICERS & THEIR FAMILIES**

- ▣ Emotional Survival For Law Enforcement
  - A Guide for Officers and Their Families
  - By Kevin M. Gilmartin, Ph.D.

▪ Information from this presentation borrowed from above-listed source

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**TRAINING INSTRUCTOR FOR THIS PRESENTATION**

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