

Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement: A Guide for Officers and Their Families

Dr. Gilmartin is a behavioral scientist who specializes in issues related to law enforcement. With twenty years of police experience under his belt, he currently provides service to the law enforcement community as a consultant. In writing this book, it was his goal to aid officers and their families in maintaining and/or improving their quality of life both personally and professionally.

Dr. Gilmartin studied the various stages in law enforcement officers' careers and found similar occurrences in those who had suffered loss in some manner. In the beginning of officers' careers, it seems that most are eager and excited to learn all they can and to have a positive career. But somewhere along the way, Gilmartin found that these officers allowed the career to take over their personal lives as well. In this book he outlines why this can occur and ways to prevent it.

Although the goal of every officer is to return home safely to his family every day, neglecting emotional survival can also turn lethal. I was surprised and intrigued by the information provided in the book which compared law enforcement felony deaths and suicide rates. According to statistics provided by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, an average of 69 officers were killed feloniously during the 1990s. A study conducted by the National P.O.L.I.C.E. Suicide Foundation revealed police suicides averaged more than three hundred per year—almost four times the felony death rate. This figure raises questions in terms of our training and physical preparedness as compared to our lack of training about our emotional well-being. Law enforcement advances steadily with better equipment and better training, but there is quite a deficiency in placing an emphasis on emotional welfare.

Dr. Gilmartin's theory and theme of the book focuses on what he refers to as the "Hypervigilance Biological Rollercoaster." Essentially, we cops develop and finetune our skills on the street to keep us very aware of our safety and the factors involved. Off-duty, Gilmartin explains how we often fall prey to the exact opposite. On-duty, we are on the upper end of the rollercoaster and tend to feel alive, alert, energetic, involved, and humorous. Off-duty, we dip into the

lower end of the rollercoaster and we can become tired, detached, isolated, and apathetic. Many of us can become couch potatoes and turn into the guy who always says "I usta." We allow the job to consume so much of our lives that we fall behind in maintaining relationships and friendships, and the hobbies and personal interests in which we were once so involved turn into stories of what we used to do or used to like.

Dr. Gilmartin explains in simple terms how officers experience complex biological reactions. His research showed the effects of hypervigilance diminish after 18-24

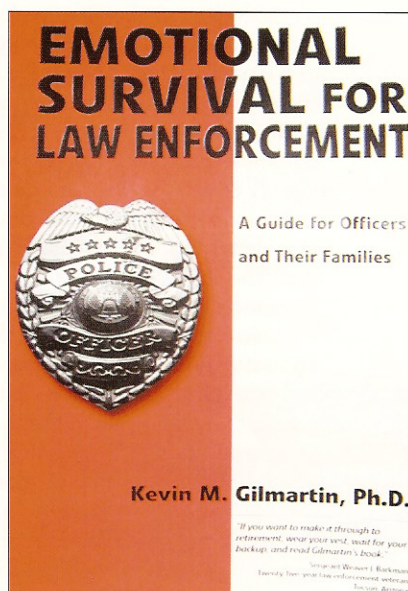
is determining what you can and cannot control in your life and finding a positive manner to deal with those things we cannot change. Keeping a positive attitude, even when things are not going the way you want, is vital.

Dr. Gilmartin feels you can be a survivor if you empower yourself by being aggressive in time management and goal-setting, by practicing physical fitness, and by controlling your financial well-being. Finding time to do the things important to you is not always enough. We have to make the time to accomplish these things. We need to focus on turning "I usta" into "I did." We should make plans and set goals in our personal lives and follow through with them, which teaches us how to take back the control of our personal time.

Because hypervigilance is physiological, the remedy must be the same. The transitions we feel between the highs and lows of the rollercoaster are our bodies' attempts to find balance and recalibrate. Physical fitness speeds up the recovery from the low end to move you toward normal ranges of emotions and social interactions. Officers engaging in normal physical routines tend to feel the same effects experienced in the upper end. Being financially irresponsible can lead to added stress, which can drag you down to the lower end.

Dr. Gilmartin's best advice is this: "Learning the skills to balance investment in the police role with the investment in personal life roles is what defines a survivor." We should place as much importance and passion on our personal lives as we do our professional one and maintain control of both. Survivors can still strive to be the best officer they can be, but they should also strive to be the best mother or father, husband or wife, community member, runner, fisherman, or Little League coach.

The message I got from this book is that it's imperative to determine what is most important to you, cherish it, and make sure you do everything in your power to not allow it to be less than you want it to be. At the end of your career, make sure your personal life mattered as much as, or more than, the life you led as a police officer.



hours, and then return to normal phases of social interaction, emotion, and perception. The recovery period, however, is often interrupted and the cycle of biological hypervigilance continues or repeats when we start back on-duty. Dr. Gilmartin was able to identify common symptoms of the Hypervigilance Rollercoaster, including social isolation at home, a withdrawal from non-police related conversations or activities, reduced interaction with non-police friends, a desire to not make decisions at home, strained or failed relationships, a deterioration in involvement with children's needs and activities, and development of the "I usta" syndrome.

The first step in being an emotional survivor and not falling prey to the Hypervigilance Rollercoaster is to recognize the symptoms and overcome them. Part of this