

# KEEPING GOOD PEOPLE GOOD

By Dr. Kevin M. Gilmartin



Being a good cop requires a very large set of skills and the capacity to balance many challenges simultaneously.

Members who attended Dr Kevin Gilmartin's riveting presentation in March have described it as "the best police training". Dr Gilmartin is returning in October on the dates below, be sure not to miss out. Expressions of interest will be called for once the venues are confirmed. Family members are also welcome. The event invitation will include the final locations and advise you on how to nominate your interest in attending.

Wollongong	31 October
Parramatta	3 November
Bourke	4 November
Lismore	5 November
Orange	6 November
Surry Hills	7 November
Albury	12 November
Moree	13 November
Port Stephens	14 November

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One of the biggest challenges to policing in a democratic society is maintaining an emotionally healthy force work of professional men and women who can deal with matters and issues that the rest of society cannot handle. If the average person could deal with the situation that the police are responding to, the police probably would not have been called for in the first place. Psychologically resilient officers can balance the need to enforce society's laws with the citizen's right to live in a free democratic society. There is probably no more important challenge for a law enforcement professional than to be able to balance practising officer safety with respect and appreciation of a citizen's liberty. It is not an easy balancing act by any means. It's been said that police deal with the "maddest, baddest, and saddest" issues in society. What becomes of the professional men and women who have to address those issues over the course of the decades of a police career? This balancing challenge takes a significant toll emotionally and physically on officers. The progression of change in many good officers is unfortunately too easy to see. A physically fit, mentally healthy, young idealistic professional entering the career unfortunately, can be transitioned into an angry isolated individual at risk for

significant psychological injury, social isolation, incremental weight gain, heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

When this happens, the psychological deterioration impacts the officer, their family, the agency, and the entire society. The old adage that, "every community has the police agency it deserves," I believe is absolutely true. When the mental health of our law enforcement professionals is a low priority or totally ignored by an agency, it is not a long wait until unaddressed psychological issues transfer themselves into inappropriate police behaviour patterns. Increases in officers acting out while on duty can be displayed in civil rights violations, corruption, or a generalised apathetic delivery of police services. The statements by deteriorating officers of, "*I handle my calls for service and that's all I do*"; "*You never get in trouble for the citizen contact you didn't make*"; or "*The more you do around here the more they screw with you*," can unfortunately become a more accurate reflection of the true organisational culture than the best written lip service oriented "Organisational Mission Statement" that hangs on the wall at many Police headquarters buildings.

Are there ways to prevent this destruction of the lives and families of our law enforcement professionals and reduce the risk to our society of having police agencies transformed into "Armies of Occupation" where *both* the rights of citizens and the mental health of our officers are equally ignored? The answer is clearly yes and actually, they are just different sides of the same problem.

Building psychological resiliency in our police professionals is not as simple a matter as just providing traditional psychological services in the non-traditional environment of a police population. Building psychological resiliency goes far beyond having the agency making the department psychologists an available option. Having the psychologist, chaplain or EAP counsellor available is an absolute foundational service, but it would be far better to view the establishment of psychological resiliency through the same creation of stakeholder partnerships and the formation of "unlikely alliances" that have proven so successful in the area of community policing. It is not solely the department psychologists' responsibility to establish an environment of psychological resiliency. It includes the development of working relationships between all parties; the physical fitness coordinator, the agency medical officer, the chaplaincy program, the police association, and executive management. When these various entities of the police organisation do not see themselves as collectively and cooperatively as all part of the solution, unfortunately mutual stereotyping and distrust leads them to becoming part of the problem.

## PREPARED FOR THE WORST

The starting point of this issue is the simple fact that entry level police colleges/academies produce very well trained professional law enforcement officers that know how to ethically and competently do their job. These young professionals practice good officer safety skills and show high levels of job related enthusiasm at the outset of their career. Basically however, Police Academies are training sprinters and then entering their graduates in the marathon. If a law

enforcement professional is required to practice officer safety skills, (and all officers are required to varying degrees to practice those skills) just that fact alone puts them at elevated risk for psychological injury. Officer safety skills means the officer enters into every unknown encounter with an elevated level of awareness of their surroundings and an elevated level of suspicion and distrust. It means the good officer is prepared for the worst case scenario and has developed a potential tactical response to whatever they might encounter. Good officers have good officer safety skills.

## SURVIVING A TACTICAL CONFRONTATION

In reality what officer safety tactical skills means is that the young law enforcement professional learns to view the world through a potentially pathological psychological orientation of heightened alertness, significant distrust and a pessimistic expectation of waiting for a potential threat to develop. The more the officer has this orientation the more likely they will survive a tactical confrontation on-duty. It also means the more likely the officer will be transitioned into an angry, cynical, socially isolated person who finds themselves sleeping less, gaining weight, and losing enthusiasm for the little things in life that previously gave them a sense of happiness or joy. Marriages are lost and families dissolve and the once physically fit idealistic young officer is now 15 kg heavier than when they graduated from the academy and is sleeping 4–6 hours a night. While the number of tactical deaths decreases, the rate of diagnosis for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depressive disorders in our officers increases. Rates of tactical deaths go down and officer suicides go up.

The tragic reality is that whether the fatal bullet is fired by a felon or a suicidal officer, both have given their life to the profession. Law enforcement as a profession must stop viewing officer survival as compartmentalised skill set development that chooses between tactical survival vs emotional survival. They are the same issue. The heightened level of alertness on-duty causes the detached isolated level of emotional and physical exhaustion off-duty. In fact, many times it's the great officers that are at great risk of psychological injury. Emotional survival for law enforcement is not difficult to understand. It does require, however, an understanding of what specifically happens to officers over the course of a law enforcement career, "You cannot solve a problem if you don't know what the problem is" is a very applicable saying with officer's mental health.

Every day, when an officer reports on-duty, they begin dealing with the issues and events outside the normal range of everyday life for the average citizen. Whether it's a broken down vehicle on the roadside, a lost child, a neighbourhood conflict, domestic violence, an armed felon, or a cat stuck up a tree (that one actually would be the Fire Department), the officer is called upon to walk into the situation and restore order. The officer is basically walking into an unknown situation with potential risk. The officer utilises both their professional training and natural survival responses to tactically resolve the issue. Levels of alertness increase, vigilance of potential threat heightens, and awareness of all factors in the environment that

pose a potential threat are observed. The officer is practicing officer safety. The officer is also beginning a biological action that keeps them alive in the short-term tactically, but sets into motion a reaction that potentially, if unaddressed leads to profound physical and psychological damage.

The alert engaged officer while on-duty can over the course of time become the exhausted, disengaged, socially isolated individual off-duty. Without awareness, the officer misinterprets this response as being "tired" and becomes sedentary and socially inactive. This attempt at restorative "rest" is the appropriate response if the person is actually tired; however, law enforcement professionals adjusting to their off-duty status are going through a far more complicated biological response than merely being tired.

The elevated levels of alertness required to perform the on-duty tasks of an officer are causing significant elevation of the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system, which are required to do the job correctly. When the officer ends their on-duty tour and transitions back to their personal life, the homeostatic physiological action is equally as profound and the officer experiences the rebound effect of the parasympathetic autonomic nervous system. Just like in physics, every action has its equal and opposite reaction. The exhausted, disengaged state many officers feel after a work day is actually the parasympathetic autonomic response. If the officer is untrained in this physical reaction, they misinterpret the response as being "tired" when they get home and disengage from activities. Ironically it is the very activities that the officer withdraws from that provide psychological resiliency. Going uncorrected, the officer potentially withdraws from social engagements, participation in family activities, relationship communication, physical fitness, hobbies, and spiritual worship community participation. These activities are the cornerstone of psychological resiliency.

Without training, the officer's life begins becoming a cyclical repetition of elevated alertness on-duty required for officer safety, followed by a parasympathetic disengagement off-duty. Socially the life of the officer is transformed. Old relationships and friendships can disappear. The personal life of the officer begins having a depressive physical and psychological orientation of exhaustion. Ironically, many times it's not what happens in their life on-duty that injures an officer, as much as what doesn't happen off-duty that has laid the foundation for the psychological injury. This is not in any way meant to imply that psychological injuries are not created by police work, it is meant to state clearly that teaching psychological resiliency to law enforcement professionals reduces psychological injury.

Not only is this unaddressed cyclical process increasing the officer's risk of depressive disorder and PTSD, it begins wreaking havoc on the officer's physical hormonal states. As the officer continues to practise the required officer safety orientation, the elevated adrenal cortical sympathetic stress response causes the liver to release glucose. The pancreas responds by secreting insulin to allow glucose to enter the cell. Chronically elevated levels of insulin (the hallmark of insulin resistance) sets the stage for the cluster of problems that make up metabolic syndrome including, after some years, heart attack and type 2 diabetes.

The best way to solve this problem is to attack it at the root, that is to keep insulin levels under control (GR). Elevated levels of insulin keep fat in the fat cell and officers gain weight, especially around the middle. This daily biologic pendulum adds up over time in veteran Police officers and is mistakenly tragically joked about as being from "eating too many donuts". The reality is that it is creating a metabolic syndrome response of insulin resistance and movement towards type 2 diabetes. This response is pretty much what a bear goes through once a year in preparation for hibernation: store fat for the coming threat of winter. A bear does it once a year, the officer that is untrained in psychological resiliency goes through the response once a day.

After a decade or even less of living through this daily biological rollercoaster, many police officers do not even resemble the young recruit who graduated so enthusiastically from the Police Academy. Their hobbies have been placed on the back burner, social engagements are avoided, their spiritual needs have gone unaddressed, anger created by this biological swing begins seeping into personal relationships, marriages are lost, and any sense of joy in life slips away. The young idealistic officer tragically can become the depressed officer who sees mankind as lost, hates their agency, sees no purpose in life, and has a growing sense of social isolation and self-destruction. The sleep pattern of the officer becomes impacted and anxiety becomes a persistent state in the officer's life, which drives an elevated risk of the anxiety-based Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and substance abuse.

## WHAT SURVIVORS TEACH US

Although on review this potential evolution of destruction of psychological resiliency seems extremely dismal and beyond help, the opposite is actually far more accurate. Why do some officers become "victims" of this process and others survive the experience? There are officers who survive and even thrive in a law enforcement career. These psychological "survivors" actually seem to have a core set of traits or experiences that can benefit the profession when studied and taught to other officers. Enhancing psychological resiliency and emotionally surviving the career requires teaching skill sets to officers, not merely treating psychologically injured officers. Teaching tactical survival skills does not mean just providing trauma surgeons after the officer is shot. It means showing ways for the officer to prevent being shot. Teaching emotional survival skills does not mean only providing psychological treatment services. It clearly means enhancing competent and available psychological services, but it means making psychological resiliency a priority, and teaching tangible pragmatic skills to the officers and their families. If we look at the traits of officers who emotionally survive the career, we can learn a few simple requirements and implement changes in the daily lives of our officers.

1) Emotionally resilient officers have been able to maintain active and engaged personal lives off-duty and away from the law enforcement agency.

They have a sense of control of their personal time and good boundaries between work and personal life. This does not mean



they do not socialise with co-workers. It means when a group of co-workers are playing golf on their days off, they are golfers, not cops with golf clubs complaining about management while walking around a golf course. It sounds very easy to say, "just keep an active personal life off-duty", but it is hard to accomplish. The problem is, what does an officer feel like doing right after work? The answer is, "Nothing". If the answer is that you feel like doing "nothing"; you will do "nothing". So, the officer and their family need to be trained in *specific personal time management skills*. They have to appreciate that the exhausted disengaged emotional state will alleviate once activity is initiated. It is not muscular fatigue that requires rest. It is a parasympathetic response that the officer needs to overcome by activity.

Personal, pre-planned, written agendas are extremely helpful to the law enforcement officer and their family in making commitments and sticking to them. Waiting until the officer gets off-duty to make a decision is self-defeating. Spontaneity does not exist in the off-duty law enforcement professional in a parasympathetic state. Just look at how the average police family makes a decision to do out to dinner, if you want an example of why preplanning is required for the police family. The officer who can make a life and death decision on-duty is overwhelmed by making a simple decision of eatery selection off-duty.

*"Where do you want to do to dinner?"*

*I don't care, anyplace is fine with me.*

*How about we go by Sextons for dinner?*

*Let's not go to Sextons.*

*Well, where do you want to go?*

*I don't care; any place is fine with me..."*

This exchange goes on to infinity and no decision is reached. Pre-planning removes the need to make a decision while in the off-duty exhausted state. The decision has already been made. Setting specific goals yields specific accomplishments. The hardest step on any journey is the first. 2) Secondly, the men and women who survive law enforcement understand that emotional stress has a physical component. They have almost always maintained a level of physical fitness. Self-initiated exercise off-duty is one of the first things the exhausted officer abandons in their off-duty lifestyle, yet physical exercise is proven to be one of the most effective means of addressing depression and anxiety. It does not take an extreme amount of physical exercise to break the off-duty depressive cycle and to reverse the incremental weight gain issue discussed above.

The U.S Centers for Disease Control in 2014 reported that losing five to seven percent of body weight, that's 4 kg to 6 kg for a 90 kg person – and getting at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity each week reduces the risk of type 2 diabetes by nearly 60 percent in those at high risk for developing the disease.

Research has also established that a degree of physical activity reduces the symptoms and depression and anxiety at the same level as treatment with pharmacological agents. Obviously, this is not meant to say that once an officer is in treatment and possibly receiving a treatment regime including medication that they should discontinue the



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medication. But it does mean the officer should discuss with their physician the benefits of exercise along with the medication. Does the officer typically look forward to exercising? Typically the answer is clearly, no. The most frequent response about the best aspect of physical exercise is “when it’s done”. Officers can invest approximately 22 minutes a day into themselves and report significant feelings of accomplishment and anxiety reduction.

## ■ Emotional survivors are good officers. They are also good golfers, good bike riders, good fishermen, good football coaches, good spouses, and good parents. They are multi-dimensional people.

3) Emotional survivors also see the world as beyond just the immediate issues of their day-to-day law enforcement existence.

They understand the need to have an emotional support system that they can speak with and not have to maintain a guarded strategic manner of revealing how they feel. Whatever they feel is OK to share. Sounds like it’s touchy feely stuff. The reality is it’s called having a true friend that accepts you no matter what you say. They might not agree with you, but they know that’s how you feel and they accept it. Many times this emotional outlet is through membership in a spiritual worship community, sometimes it’s a counsellor/therapist, at other times a spouse or good friend is the outlet. The need to not have to guard or censor what we say is an emotional support outlet that cannot be over estimated. Loneliness and social isolation combined with trauma and emotional strain are deadly for law enforcement professionals.

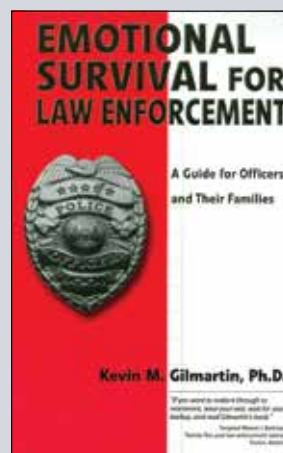
4) Emotional survivors always are multi-dimensional people.

They have lots of things going on in their life, only one aspect of which is their professional role of law enforcement officer. The law enforcement role is not the only defining aspect of their life. This is terribly important to establishing a life of emotional resiliency. Emotionally resilient officers care deeply about their career, but it is not their entire life. Once an officer permits their life, because of off-duty exhaustion, to be reduced to only the one dimension of their on-duty professional role, they have to appreciate that their on-duty role is under the control and authority of others of higher rank in the law enforcement agency. Make the job your life and someone else basically controls your job role; they now control your life. It is never emotionally settling to have someone else control your life.

A good officer might not always be blessed or lucky enough to work for a competent and ethical leader. They might have to work for an incompetent jerk. It is stressful enough to have a jerk control your job function; it’s overwhelming to have a jerk control your life. So many good officers start their career as balanced active individuals, as the years pass and the

other activities in their life slip away, the law enforcement role becomes their only personal identifier. The officer becomes extremely vulnerable to emotional threat because their only personal identifier is in a role control by someone else. Bosses control the job role, as they should control the job role. The emotional survivor, however, controls their life and they clearly understand the difference in these two realms of control. They can divide their lives into aspects they control and aspects they do not control. The reality is the officer has almost absolute control over their off-duty life and that is the dimension they stop emotionally investing in. They invest heavily in the law enforcement role that other people control and not in the roles they themselves control. Emotional survivors are good officers. They are also good golfers, good bike riders, good fishermen, good football coaches, good spouses, and good parents. They are multi-dimensional people.

To maintain these aspects of emotional resiliency takes a commitment of effort and resources by both the individual member and the agency working in partnership. Selecting good emotionally balanced police candidates to enter the career is an important role, but not the most important role. Maintaining emotionally balanced officers is the most important role. Keeping good people good is the most important task. We cannot prevent our officers from being exposed to the trauma of the worst aspects of human behaviour, but we can assist officers in psychological injury prevention and also be available when the officer requires a helping hand. ■



Dr. Gilmartin is a behavioural scientist and management consultant specialising in the law enforcement. He spent 20 years in law enforcement in Tucson, Arizona. During his tenure, he supervised the Behavioral Sciences Unit and the Hostage Negotiations Team. He is a former recipient of the *IACP-Parade Magazine* National Police Officer Service Award for contributions during hostage negotiations. He presently maintains a

consulting relationship with law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and in Canada. He is a guest instructor at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia and a faculty member of the FBI Law Enforcement Executive Development Institute (LEEDS, EDI and the National Executive Development Institute). He is a charter member of the IACP: Psychological Services Section and former vice-president of the Society of Police and Criminal Psychology. He is the author of the book *Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement*, and also numerous articles published by the Dept. of Justice, the IACP, and the FBI. Dr. Gilmartin is a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps.