

# THE LETHAL TRIAD

By Dr. Kevin M. Gilmartin

Teaching law enforcement professionals to survive and live through a police career cannot be limited to just teaching operational tactical survival skills. Teaching officers the skills of emotional survival are just as important.

Tactical skill development obviously is of paramount importance, however, the law enforcement profession loses more officers to self-destruction than it does to felony death. Yet most training academies invest far more time and resources on the development of skills to survive the more tangible and immediate threats in the field. Tactical skill development is an absolute necessity, but so are emotional survival skills.

Developing emotional survival skills requires a multi-faced approach. There is no one size fits all solution to maintaining a law enforcement agency comprised of emotionally resilient personnel, but there clearly are a few danger areas that the officer must avoid. I call these the Lethal Triad, which is comprised of three areas: isolation, anger, and projection of blame.

## THE CYCLE OF ISOLATION

Isolation is probably one of the first psychological injuries that happen to individuals when they begin a law enforcement career. The emotionally exhausted state that many law enforcement professionals experience after a work day ends, can begin causing the person to pull back from social engagements and activities. Hobbies are engaged in less frequently and sedentary electronic media entertainment replaces physical activity. Since many law enforcement encounters with the public can have a potentially negative dimension — people don't call cops because something is working right — the officer can begin removing themselves from social interaction during their off-duty life.

This inactivity can be exacerbated by the feeling of physical exhaustion that biologically occurs after being in a vigilant state for the duration of a work shift. Emotionally resilient personnel have been trained to understand and overcome this temporary exhaustive state and to increase activity levels off-duty. Officers who do not address this inactivity find themselves progressively withdrawing from social encounters. After a few years, some officers find the vast majority of social engagement is during their on-duty life.

The sedentary off-duty life potentially leaves the person without the available support systems provided by engaged relationships or membership in various communities. Many officers find themselves with no one to turn to in a time of crisis. As a person becomes increasingly isolated, whatever crisis or emotional challenge that is occurring is handled without support. Social participation in groups, sports teams, church membership, or vocational clubs is absolutely necessary for the law enforcement professional to break the isolation cycle and to see beyond the immediate horizon of whatever emotional event is taking place in their life. Loneliness can be deadly for law enforcement professionals.

## DR GILMARTIN IS RETURNING



Members who attended Dr Kevin Gilmartin's riveting presentation in March have described it as "the best police training". Dr Gilmartin explains what happens to us psychologically in a way we can all understand and recognise. He has a few simple strategies we can all do which

will improve our lives and make us more resilient. Dr Gilmartin is returning in October on the dates below, be sure not to miss out. Partners and adult family members are also welcome.

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

Proudly sponsored by the Police Association of NSW and the NSW Police Force.

For further information on session times and nomination of attendance, please contact the NSWPF contact officer for Dr Gilmartin's visit, Ms Sharon Buckley at Workforce Safety, on EN 53360 or [buck1sha@police.nsw.gov.au](mailto:buck1sha@police.nsw.gov.au)

## ANGER

If there is one emotion that law enforcement professionals readily admit to experiencing, it is anger. In the law enforcement culture, officers give themselves permission to become angry. It's OK to get "pissed off"; however, they don't give themselves permission for other emotions. It's not OK to be sad, afraid, depressed or anxious. Anger is the emotional and biological reaction that comes about when an event violates

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our expectations. Our expectations of events are hidden behind the words "should," "fair," "right," or "ought to be". If things took place according to the cops' expectations and values, things would be basically normal, because most cops are basically normal. People don't call cops for "normal" stuff. Law enforcement professionals are constantly exposed to a lifetime of events and people that violate their expectations of how things "should be". The main anger in law enforcement is reserved, however, for management. This is because officers project onto management their own ideas or expectations of what is "fair" "right" or "ought to be". Ironically the officers put their expectations onto people over whom they have no control.

Working in an authority-based culture requires significant anger management skills. This is often expressed by officers with the statement, "I can handle the idiots on the street better than the idiots I work for". It sounds good at first glance, but what the officer is really saying is, "I have no control over this event or situation that management controls and it holds huge emotional importance to me". People don't get angry over things that are not emotionally important to them.

Anger reduction skills have many different components. Physical exercise, for example, is just one extremely important factor to anger reduction. The officer has two problems: firstly, they work for an idiot and secondly, they're angry. After the officer spends time in the gym exercising they soon discover that the boss is still an idiot but, it doesn't bother them physically quite as much. They're not quite as "pissed off". So they have solved 50% of the problem. The real issue, however, is that the officer wants things to follow their expectations of how things "should be handled" and that flies in the face of reality.

Also issues such as sleep deprivation significantly increase mood deterioration. Seven to eight hours of sleep are fundamental to physical health and emotional wellbeing, yet in North America 83% of officers experience inadequate sleep. Unfortunately, four to six hours becomes the norm. Sleep hygiene, physical exercise, substance abuse awareness and generalised anger reduction training are essential building blocks to psychological resiliency.

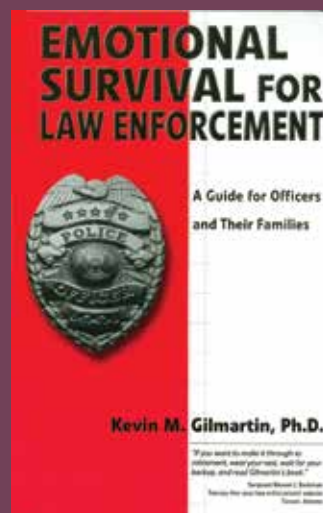
### PROJECTION OF BLAME

Emotional resiliency requires the person to see themselves as the source of responsibility for their own emotional reactions. The emotionally resilient person doesn't take responsibility for things outside of their control. They do, however, take responsibility for how they react to those things. When law

enforcement professionals reduce their world to just their professional role, they are "isolating" emotionally to a world of other individuals of higher rank in the organisation control.

Emotional "survivors" point the finger of responsibility for their emotional reactions at themselves. They make statements like, "I have to get through this situation". Emotional "victims" point the finger of responsibility at others and project blame, "They did this to me". This is not denying the plight of genuine victims; it is, however, putting the emphasis on surviving and thriving through traumatic events, not fault finding that only externalises and targets others with our anger. The problem with always projecting blame onto others who we do not control, is that the officer potentially reaches a point where they feel totally overwhelmed and incapable of addressing the issues. They have no skill development in emotional problem solving. They try to just tough it out and eventually become overwhelmed and breakdown, and the risk of self-destructive action significantly increases.

Breaking the cycle of the Lethal Triad is just one of the first steps in developing a resilient orientation and emotionally surviving a law enforcement career. Having a cadre of professionals that do not become angry, socially isolated individuals that blame others for their plight is one of the first steps to developing emotional survivors of one of the most emotionally demanding professions. ■



Behavioural scientist Dr Gilmartin 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 management consultant specialising in the law enforcement for 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). Dr Gilmartin is a former recipient of the *IACP-Parade Magazine* National Police Officer Service Award for contributions during hostage negotiations. 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.