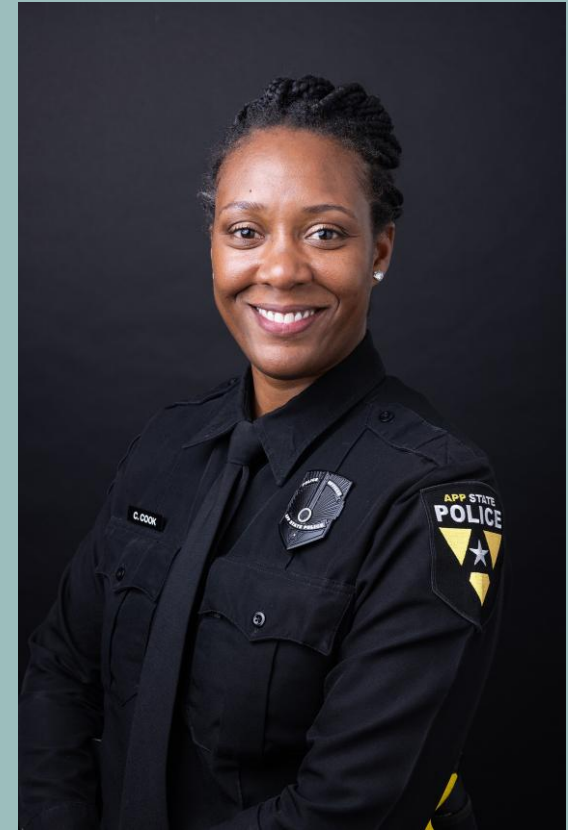


CONNECTED IN CRISIS: COMMON COUPLE DYNAMICS OF LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS AND THEIR PARTNERS



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A CONTENT WARNING AND A DISCLAIMER

Some of the topics we will discuss, some of the videos we show, and some of the discussions we will lead are traumatic in nature and involve violence; death; physical, sexual, and emotional trauma; and harm to children.

If you need to step out at any point, we encourage you to be thoughtful about your own emotional regulation and self-care.

We also encourage you to be thoughtful about self-disclosure in this setting.

RECOGNIZING OUR PRIVILEGE

Cultural humility is imperative

Our own social locations create inherent biases

There are varying opinions, experiences, and perspectives on what law enforcement officers (LEOs) represent in peoples' lives – we seek to honor all of those with curiosity and humility

Our desire and aim in this presentation is to help LEOs, their partners, and their families develop healthier relationships

THESE CONVERSATIONS ARE NUANCED



Being a white LEO is not the same as being a black LEO

Being a male LEO is not the same as being a female LEO

Being a straight LEO is not the same as being a gay LEO

Being a 55-year old LEO is not the same as being a 25-year old LEO

Being an able-bodied LEO is not the same as being a physically disabled LEO

(...and numerous other social locations to keep in mind)

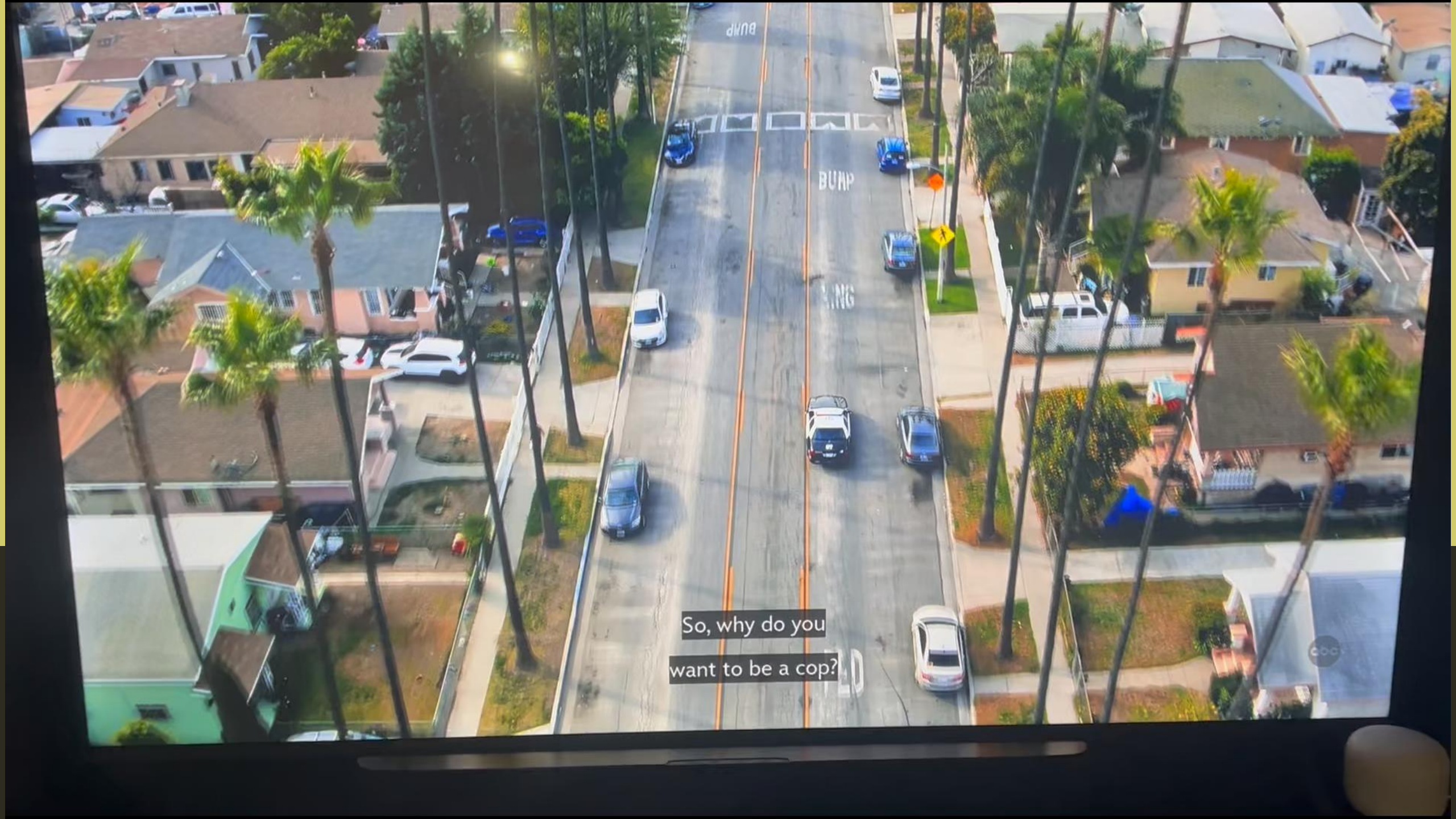


ICEBREAKER: TELL US ABOUT A
COP SHOW AND HOW IT RELATES
TO COUPLE/FAMILY
RELATIONSHIPS AND
"COP STEREOTYPES"



LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS AND STRESS

Two strongest predictors of negative outcomes for individuals and families:
Excessive job demands and persistent stress



So, why do you
want to be a cop?



What messages do
they receive about
emotions and
survival?

ROOKIES IN TRAINING

COMMON INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

Consistent Outcomes

High turn over

High absenteeism

Poor performance

Difficulty recruiting

Effective Solutions

Family support mediates effect of stress/burnout

Committed relationship:

- Less stress
- Less depression
- Less suicidal ideation
- More active coping
- More active Coping
 - Navigate stress better



UNIQUE STRESSORS AND TRAUMA FACED BY LEOS

Gunfire at LEOs, gunfire from LEOs

First responders at accidents

Public scrutiny, media attention, rejection

Trauma – violent crime, serious accidents

Exposure to death – often of the vulnerable (children, elderly)

Shift work and sleep disruption

Legal pressure



IMPACT OF STRESS



It is routine occupational stress that seems to cause the most harm. Liberman et al. (2002) found that these stressors were stronger predictors of psychological distress than the cumulative effect of exposure to critical incidents. While the traumatic aspects of policing garner a fair amount of research attention, it is the mundane that may be more dangerous. (Bonner & Brimhall, 2022, p. 61)

TABLE 1
POLICE STRESSORS RANKED BY MEAN SCORES ON POLICE STRESS SURVEY

Stressor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Stressor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Killing someone in line of duty	79.4	27.9	Court leniency	42.7	27.5
Fellow officer killed	76.7	23.2	Disagreeable regulations	42.3	28.2
Physical attack	71.0	27.6	Ineffective judicial system	42.0	26.9
Battered child	69.2	31.0	Family demands	41.8	30.5
High-speed chases	63.7	28.4	Politics in department	40.6	31.9
Shift work	61.2	29.2	Inadequate supervision	40.1	29.5
Use of force	61.0	29.0	Public criticism	39.5	27.2
Inadequate department support	60.9	29.2	Assigned new duties	39.2	24.2
Incompatible partner	60.4	28.1	Ineffective corrections	39.1	27.8
Accident in patrol car	59.9	28.2	Inadequate salary	38.5	30.1
Insufficient personnel	58.5	27.6	Change from boredom to high		
Aggressive crowds	56.7	26.1	stress	38.1	27.4
Felony in progress	55.3	26.1	Making arrests alone	37.2	25.3
Excessive discipline	53.3	28.8	Personal insult from citizen	36.7	27.0
Plea bargaining	52.8	29.8	Negative public image	36.2	26.6
Death notifications	52.6	29.0	Increased responsibility	33.0	23.3
Inadequate support (super.)	52.4	30.5	Exposure to pain and suffering	33.0	21.3
Inadequate equipment	52.4	27.6	Exposure to death	32.1	21.5
Family disputes	52.0	26.7	Second job	31.5	29.2
Negative press coverage	51.8	26.6	Lack of participation-decisions	31.1	24.5
Court on day off	51.1	29.3	Public apathy	29.5	22.0
Job conflict with rules	50.6	26.8	Promotion competition	29.5	26.6
Fellow officer not doing job	49.0	27.3	Promotion or commendation	28.8	27.7
Lack of recognition	48.1	29.0	Nonpolice tasks	27.9	25.3
Physical injury on job	47.1	35.9	Demands for high morality	26.1	24.9
Making quick decisions	45.8	27.6	Politics outside department	25.5	26.7
Restrictive court decisions	44.8	26.5	Strained nonpolice relations	23.6	24.0
Getting along with supervisors	44.5	30.8	Boredom	23.3	22.4
Disagreeable duties	43.9	25.2	Minor physical injuries	23.2	21.4
Mistreatment in court	43.5	27.2	Racial conflicts	22.5	22.2
Excessive paperwork	43.2	29.0	Over-all mean	44.8	14.2

1994

Table 2. Mean Stress Ratings (SPSS) by Subscale and Gender (N = 262).

	Overall mean (SD)	Male officers' mean (SD)	Female officers' mean (SD)	T-value
<u>Overall SPSS score</u>	34.3 (16.1)	33.94 (16.00)	37.61 (16.34)	-1.16
<u>Administrative/professional pressure</u>				
<i>Inadequate salary</i>	65.9 (32.9)	66.39 (32.98)	62.66 (31.80)	0.61
<i>Court appearances on day off or day following night shift</i>	63.5 (35.5)	63.96 (35.33)	62.50 (35.97)	0.22
<i>Changing from day to night shift</i>	54.4 (33.2)	54.64 (34.14)	55.63 (31.15)	-0.16
<i>Court leniency with criminals</i>	53.4 (33.2)	54.20 (33.43)	46.50 (30.59)	1.24
<i>Insufficient manpower to adequately handle a job</i>	52.0 (29.9)	52.15 (30.22)	50.88 (26.74)	0.23
<i>Distorted or negative press accounts of police</i>	50.1 (32.1)	50.63 (31.86)	52.91 (33.23)	-0.38

Physical/psychological threat

<i>Fellow officer killed in the line of duty</i>	63.6 (37.8)	61.90 (38.56)	76.41 (28.86)	-2.05*
<i>Exposure to battered or dead children</i>	49.2 (35.3)	48.28 (35.67)	59.19 (29.53)	-1.66
<i>Killing someone in the line of duty</i>	47.8 (39.3)	46.19 (39.54)	63.06 (33.56)	-2.27*
<i>Physical attack on one's person</i>	40.6 (32.5)	39.12 (32.59)	54.38 (27.88)	-2.53*
<i>Demands made by family for more time</i>	37.4 (32.5)	37.33 (32.35)	36.72 (33.04)	0.10
<i>Confrontations with aggressive crowds</i>	36.9 (28.5)	36.11 (28.41)	45.25 (27.57)	-1.72



MOST STRESSFUL?

Six of the top ten fall under administrative/professional pressure

Two fall under the physical/psychological threat category

Two fall under the lack of support category.



MOST STRESSFUL?

Female Officers:

1. Fellow officer killed
2. Killing someone
3. A physical attack on my person
4. Situation requiring force
5. Making arrests while alone
6. Possibility of minor injury
7. Personal insults from citizens
8. Making critical on the spot decisions
9. Exposure to adults in pain

RESEARCH: GENDER DIFFERENCES IN LEOS

Female officers have significantly higher mean scores for stress, especially pertaining to their own safety in the line of duty.

Female officers will perceive more threatening aspects of policing as more stressful.

Females use more positive coping strategies compared to male officers.



LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS AND COPING

Most promising interventions are those that strengthen support rather than reducing stress/negativity (Brimhall et al., 2019; Williamson et al., 2026)

THE BULLET PROOF VEST

Many LEOs have a hard time taking off the bullet proof vest when they return home and partners want to connect

Clinical example from Jake's couple



Table 4. Significant Differences in Coping Strategies by Gender (N = 234).

	Overall mean (SD)	Male officers' mean (SD)	Female officers' mean (SD)	T-value
Active coping	4.98 (2.00)	4.88 (2.01)	6.05 (1.64)	-2.98*
Planning	4.70 (2.01)	4.60 (2.02)	5.75 (1.59)	-3.02*
Acceptance	4.61 (1.87)	4.55 (1.87)	5.25 (1.80)	-1.66
Religion	4.12 (2.19)	3.98 (2.13)	5.39 (2.33)	-3.01*
Positive reframing	4.35 (1.81)	4.25 (1.77)	5.40 (1.88)	-2.64*
Self-distraction	3.74 (1.57)	3.68 (1.55)	4.33 (1.71)	-1.95
Emotional support	4.03 (1.81)	3.95 (1.80)	4.79 (1.77)	-2.18*
Humor	3.83 (1.80)	3.79 (1.81)	4.35 (1.73)	-1.40
Self-blame	3.45 (1.57)	3.40 (1.53)	3.88 (1.90)	-1.40
Instrumental support	3.72 (1.78)	3.65 (1.78)	4.48 (1.53)	-2.15*
Venting	3.44 (1.41)	3.37 (1.36)	4.13 (1.73)	-2.51*
Substance abuse	2.43 (1.07)	2.43 (1.10)	2.33 (0.70)	0.44
Disengagement	2.37 (0.79)	2.36 (0.79)	2.46 (0.78)	-0.59
Denial	2.16 (0.57)	2.16 (0.56)	2.17 (0.64)	-0.05

Note. Results for all respondents that answered all items for the Brief COPE and answered the demographic question regarding gender are provided (N = 234).

**NOT BEING MARRIED WAS ONLY A SIGNIFICANT
PREDICTOR OF USING DENIAL AS A COPING STRATEGY.**

**7 OF THE 20 TOP-RANKED STRESSORS WERE
ORGANIZATIONAL:**

**SHIFT WORK (HIGHEST RANKING),
INADEQUATE SUPPORT OF THE DEPARTMENT
INADEQUATE SUPPORT BY SUPERVISORS.**



TAKE HOME MESSAGE

Regardless of form,
increased levels of
social support were
related to decreased
levels of perceived
stress



TAKE HOME MESSAGE

Ultimately, though, a holistic approach that incorporates comprehensive support services such as alcohol abuse treatment, wellness training, training on positive coping mechanisms, and mental health services for the entire family may represent the best path forward

(Bonner & Brimhall, 2022; Chae & Boyle, 2013; Gershon et al., 2009; Mumford et al., 2015).

"I'LL TELL YOUR WIFE IF YOU TELL MINE" - THE WIRE



RECENT CLIENT COMMENTS (LEO AND WIFE)

Husband: "You don't want to know the stuff I see on a daily basis. Sometimes I tell you, I guess, but I don't really want to talk about it."

Wife: "I actually like it when you talk to me about your work. It's better than not talking. All we do in the evening is watch TV or you're on your phone."

Husband: "We go out to eat all the time... Alright, you want to know what was on my mind last night? I got to a car crash and pulled out the dead body of a 9-year old girl. Her mama was there sobbing. You think I want you to know about that?"

Wife: "That's awful..... I just want to be here for you..."

Husband: "Yeah.....well..... (long pause).....I don't know....." (shrugs, sits back, let's out a long sigh, crosses arms and looks at the floor)

CODE SHIFTING: TAKING OFF THE VEST

At Work



objectivity



compartmentalization

At Home



withdrawal



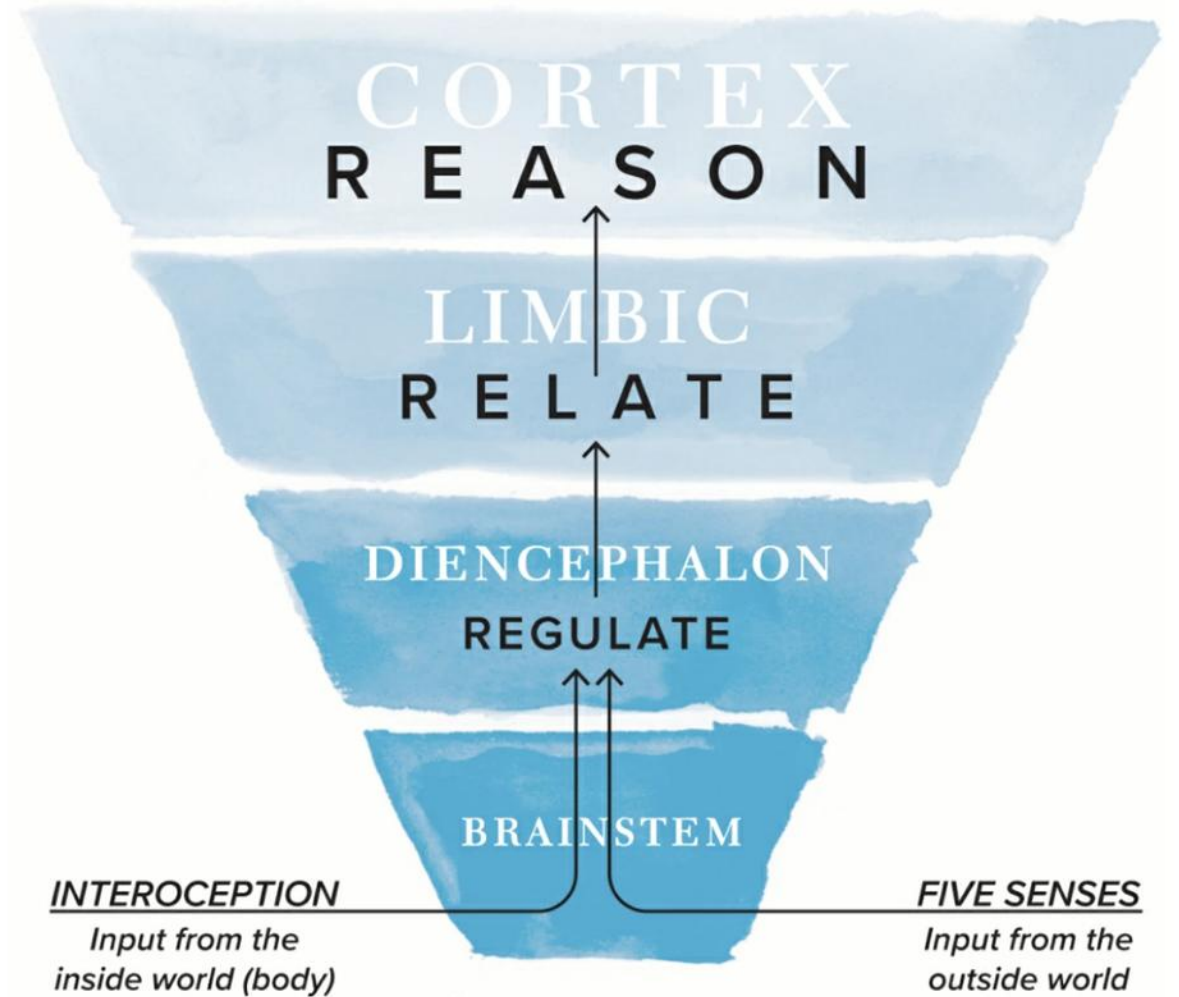
stonewalling

*Replace performance anxiety and fear of failure with psychological safety (encourage mistakes/cultural faux pas)



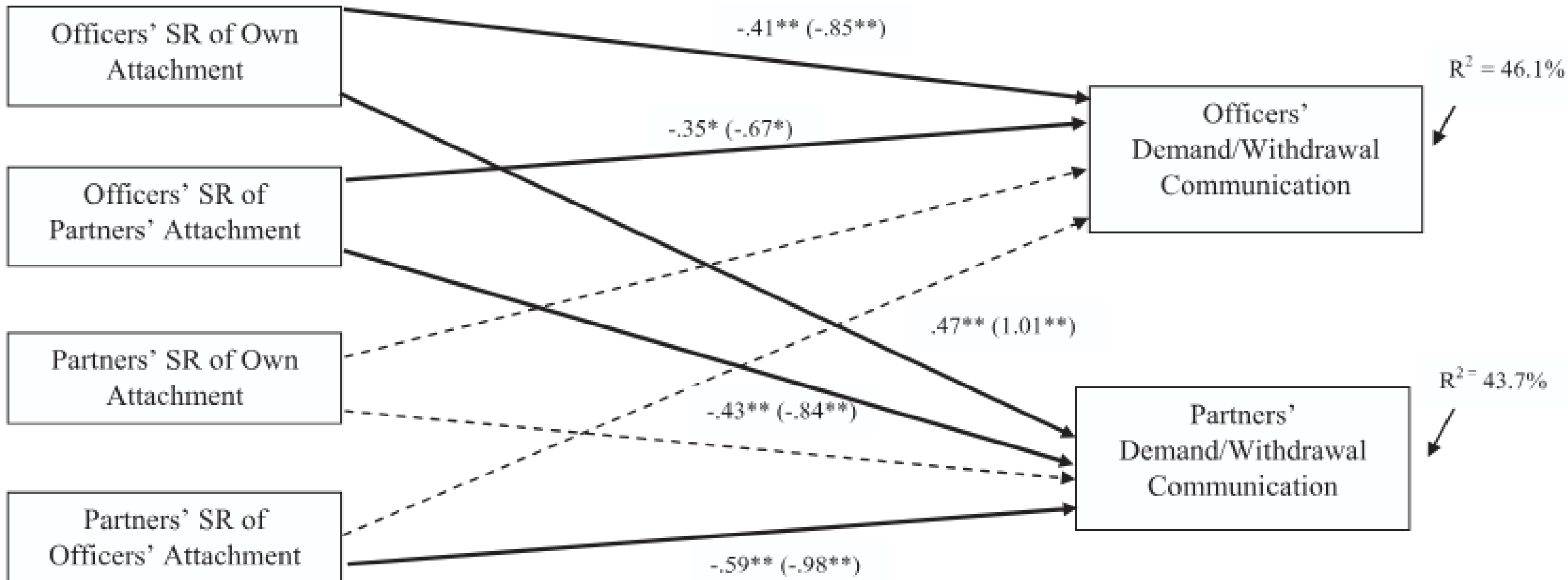
STATE OF HYPERAROUSAL

SEQUENCE OF ENGAGEMENT



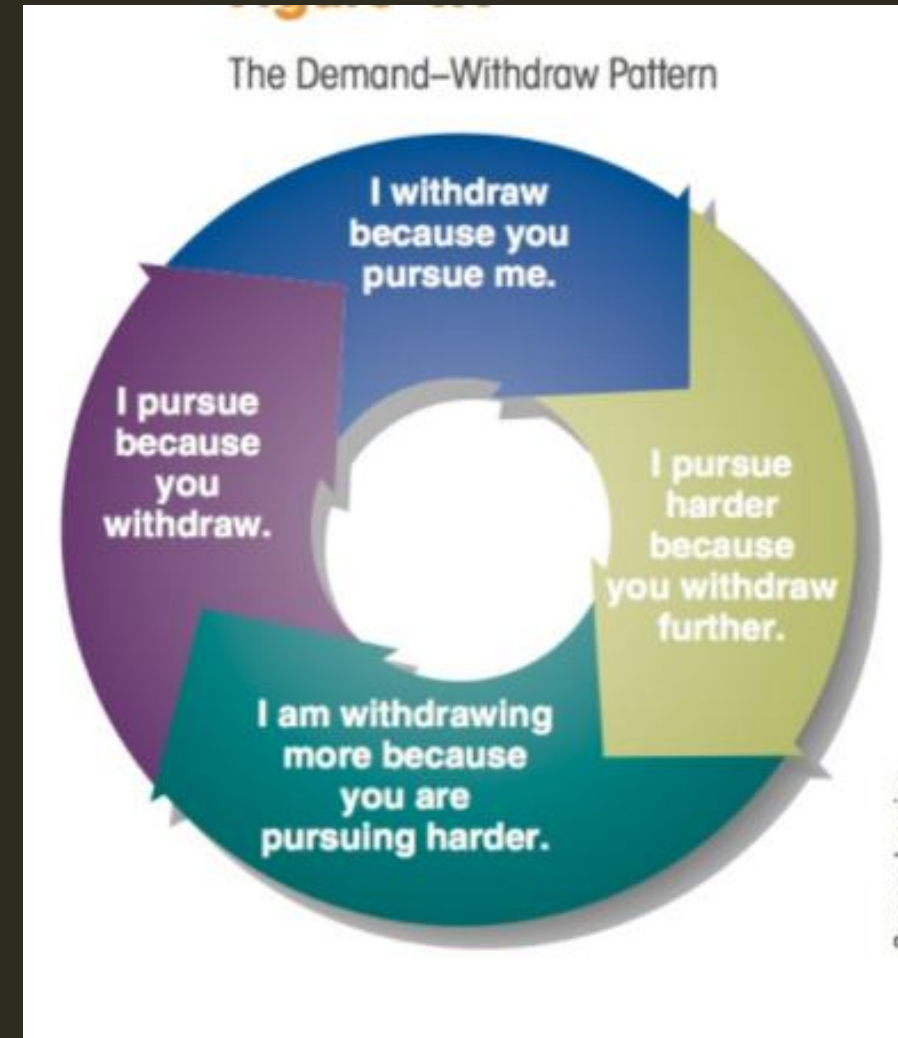
Our brain is continually getting input from our body (interoception) and the world (five senses). These in-

A.R.E. MATTERS?



PURSUE/WITHDRAW CYCLE (ANDY)

1. Self-Regulation (both)
2. Appreciation/Acknowledge Sacrifice (often core part of resentment) (Partner)
 - Major stressors identified by LEO's
 - Lack of recognition
 - Criticism/disdain from public
 - Lack of supervisory support
3. Reassurance that sharing is protecting not burden (Partner)
 - Thank them specifically for sharing
 - Include emotional value of sharing
4. Reminders that this is a bullet-free zone so "vest" is not necessary (Partner)
5. Willingness to let the partner be THE partner (LEO)
6. Understand that not knowing is scarier than knowing (LEO)



THE FUGITIVE - "I DON'T BARGAIN"



RESEARCH FROM LEOS AND PARTNERS (WILLIAMSON ET AL., 2025)

Negative coping behaviors by LEOs and their partners was linked with less connection (as measured by attachment assessment)

Coping strategies such as avoidance, substance use, denial, and distraction are associated with poorer connection for these couples

Translation – when an LEO decides to "protect" their partner from the difficult things they face at work, it can lead to disconnection and has a negative impact on the union

CASE VIGNETTE

David, a 41-year-old patrol sergeant with 16 years in law enforcement, and his wife, Maya, a 39-year-old accountant, present for couples therapy after months of escalating conflict and emotional distance. Over the past year, David has been working rotating night shifts and mandatory overtime following several critical incidents, including responding to a fatal motor vehicle accident involving a high school friend and a recent officer-involved shooting investigation in his department. Since these events, Maya reports that David has become increasingly irritable, hypervigilant at home, and emotionally unavailable, often sleeping during the day and withdrawing to the garage late at night. David denies needing help but acknowledges difficulty sleeping, frequent irritability, and feeling constantly “on edge.” Their 10-year-old son has begun having behavioral problems at school, and Maya feels overwhelmed managing parenting responsibilities while also working long shifts herself. She reports feeling resentful and lonely, stating that attempts to talk about the changes in David’s behavior lead to arguments or shutdowns. David says he feels misunderstood and pressured, explaining that talking about work feels unsafe and that he worries losing emotional control in front of his family could make things worse. Both partners describe loving each other but feeling trapped in a cycle of avoidance, resentment, and disconnection that is beginning to affect their parenting and family stability.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING

- 1) How might David's exposure to trauma and occupational culture in law enforcement shape his emotional withdrawal and reluctance to discuss work?
- 2) How might Maya's experience of emotional isolation and increased parenting burden influence her pursuit of connection and conflict escalation?
- 3) What **systemic patterns** do you observe (and could you address) in the couple's interaction cycle?
- 4) How might you build **trust and safety** with David if he is reluctant to discuss work-related stress?
- 5) What strategies could help both partners feel **validated without escalating blame**?



CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

(WILLIAMSON ET AL., 2025)

Help LEOs and partners share **more** with each other (while maintaining confidentiality) **not less!**

Train couples to increase their accessibility, responsiveness, and engagement when discussing these topics.

Teach them to validate and be curious instead of feeling pressure to give solutions.

PARTNERS: HONORING COURAGE AND EXPRESSING APPRECIATION



The more specific the praise the better

Be open to listen with curiosity and validate expressions of fear, frustration, anger, and exhaustion

Be open about your expectations (e.g., time together, money, sex, evening routines, communication with social network)



GENDER DIFFERENCES

Female LEO

Sexual harassment

Negative attitudes abt. female officers

Second Shift

Higher levels:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Suicidal Ideation
- Social support
- Emotionally focused coping

Male LEO

Problem solving coping

THANK YOU!

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OFFICER JUDY HOPPS — FIRST DAY ON THE JOB



JAKE VIDEO CLIP IDEAS

“I don’t bargain” – The Fugitive

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPiaf2I3Sjo>

“Officer Training” or “Partnership Assignments” – Zootopia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSoFuALGvhQ>

Options - "I'll tell your wife if you tell mine" - The Wire

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvI3bVxDaaA>