Hi honey! I'm home! Now leave me alone. I need to veg out in front of the television. Does this sound familiar? If so, you're not alone.

Police often times need some “quiet time” to decompensate and transition back to their personal life following a long shift. A commute from work can sometimes offer the time and space needed to unwind and transition, but a commute through stressful traffic is unlikely to offer the chance to disconnect from the police officer role.

Reminding yourself that you have left work and are going home where you are a “father, mother, wife, husband, pet-parent, sister, etc.” and not a “police officer” can help you make the transition. I used to keep a picture of my husband on my visor and would call my nephew to remind me that I was a wife and aunt, not a police officer on my drive home.

In a study I conducted on police officers coping with secondary traumatic stress, one reported that he took time each day at the end of his shift to decompensate. He spent some time alone to give himself the space to slow down from a day of go-go-go! He was then able to talk with his fiancé about his day without feeling the pressure of the hurried pace. Initially, it was hard for her to understand why he wanted to be alone when they had been apart most of the day. Once she understood that he was just taking the time he needed for himself first and for them next, she didn’t take his behaviour personally.

Personal time to decompensate takes many forms. It might include passive activities such as watching television or playing video games or more active activities such as playing sports or going for a run. It isn’t always easy to find this time due to obligations at home but it is possible with some creative family planning and open communications.

Taking off your mental armor requires that you:

1. Openly communicate this need to your loved ones so they do not misinterpret your behaviour as a lack of interest in them, and
2. Use a routine that works for you (active/passive, indoor/outdoor, alone/with others, etc.).

One pitfall can be assuming that others know, or should know, what you need. This is very problematic thinking, as you are the only one who really knows this and it is your responsibility to share it. In order to do this, you must be aware of what you need to let work stay at work. Instead of quiet time alone perhaps it would be helpful for you to take a few minutes to vent your frustrations to a loved one. If that’s the case, do it! Just let them know what you need from them and make sure they are willing and able to give it to you. Oh, and be prepared to return the favour down the road.

What if you don’t feel you can talk to your friends or loved ones about your work?

Police see some pretty horrific stuff and sharing the details of these events can traumatize others, making them more concerned for your safety and well-being at work. I encourage you to tell them that you had a rough day and responded to some horrific calls, but that you do not want to discuss the call itself. I hope you talked to co-workers, supervisors and/or peer support about the event while you were at work, or at least plan to very soon. This is another instance where talking to a third-party such as a mental health professional is a good idea as you can unload the details of the day without fear of traumatizing a loved one.

Even if you don’t have a family waiting at home for you, it is still important to leave your work at work. I would still urge you to do what works for you to transition to your personal life. If you are single it may be harder for you to maintain balance between your work and personal life because you may not be held accountable by a spouse or child to maintain other roles. You can monitor your own habits and sign up for non-police activities that help you stay well-rounded.

Regardless of your family situation, you can shed the mental armour that accompanies your police role and return to your home as your non-police self.

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