Going home rituals for cops: Don’t expect your family to always adjust to you – you have to make allowances for them as well.

Dr. Ellen Kirschman – who was recently honored by the American Psychological Association for her contribution to law enforcement psychological health – says in *I Love a Cop*, we live in a weird “police officer’s paradox.” The same work habits that make us a good, safe cop sometimes makes us kind of a jerk at home. Dr. Kirschman says it a lot more diplomatically, but that’s basically the idea. As I’ve talked about before, we crime fighters have a 75 percent divorce rate, a high rate of alcoholism, and we tend to be catastrophic in our thoughts and actions. In other words, we’re not always a lot of fun to have as a spouse, parent, or partner.

In the “Emotional Survival” section of the Street Survival Seminar, I like to talk about “going home rituals.” Here are just a few tips to make the transition from work to home a bit easier on everyone:

**Safety First**
We cannot afford to have the attitude that “I’m off duty now, I’m just another citizen.” Accept the fact that we are getting attacked and sometimes killed in off duty incidents, often just as we’re just leaving work. Recent incidents in Chicago, Seattle, and California bear this out. Using Colonel Cooper’s Colors, make sure you remain in condition Yellow as you go off duty.

Be aware of who is in the station parking lot as you leave work and make sure you are armed. If you don’t drive a take-home car, but you wear your uniform home (something I highly discourage), cover it up with a jacket or sweatshirt. Check occasionally to see if you’re being followed. As Street Survival’s Senior Instructor Dave Smith likes to say, “It’s not paranoia, its preparation.”

**Positive Self Talk**
Too often the drive home is where we start to beat ourselves up, saying to ourselves stuff like, “I should have done this…I should have said that.” Self-reflection is a good thing, self-flagellation is not. If you want to replay your workday in your mind, go ahead, but set a time limit and make it productive. Are you reliving that “flaming Adam-Henry I stopped for speeding” as an internal training event on how you could have better diffused the situation or as a hate-a-thon for an unappreciative citizen?

Are you mulling over your verbal confrontation with the deputy chief as a way to reflect on what you could have said or done differently to improve future communication or simply as an
exercise in raising your own blood pressure as you recall what a complete idiot the guy is. Remember that “Positive Self Talk” isn’t just about winning on the street, it is also essential to your emotional and physical well-being as a person.

Music and Other Mind Games
I often used to spend the 10-mile drive home (40 minutes in rush hour traffic) catching up on the latest in talk radio. I’d arrive home better informed, but usually pretty crabby. I learned to turn off the news and turn on some of my favorite country music.

I also have a little sign up on the driver’s side visor of my personal car that says “Life is Not a Dress Rehearsal.” In other words, we only get one shot at our brief time on Earth.

I also have a photo of my kids, a nice note from my dad, and a romantic card my husband once gave me. These things are there to remind me that I’m more than just a cop. Use your drive home to focus on the pleasant aspects of what and who you’re coming home to, and take a minute to be grateful that you’re going home in one piece; many of our brothers and sisters don’t.

Blood Sugar and Hydration
Cops are notoriously lousy eaters. We either overeat or don’t eat often enough, and we rarely take in enough fluid. If you haven’t had time (or haven’t taken the time) to keep up your blood sugar level by ingesting several small meals during your shift, you’re going to walk in the door at home starving, distracted, and maybe short-tempered. The same goes for hydration – make sure you consume enough fluids during your workday, and try to drink a bottle of water on the way home. When you get home, drink more water – don’t automatically reach for a beer or a glass of wine – and give yourself time to settle down before you pour yourself a drink.

Keeping Promises
Cops get busy, shifts go late, and promises get broken. Do everything in your power to keep the promises you’ve made to your loved ones (even if you do get there late) because chances are, your kid, spouse, your partner, maybe even your dog has been waiting all day or night for you to get home. For example, several years ago – a few days before Halloween – I’d promised my daughter that we would carve pumpkins as soon as I got home. After three 12-hour shifts (which, for the sergeants at my agency was 14 hours and a lot of aggravation), I pulled into the driveway wondering how the heck I could get out of carving those pumpkins.

“Mommy’s had a long day” kept popping into my mind, but mommy always has long days, and my daughter was not going to be impressed or sympathetic. I walked into the kitchen; saw the three pumpkins on the table, and my girl, knife in hand, ready to start slicing and dicing. What was I going to say? I sat down and got to work. Thankfully, Dave slipped me an ice cold beer during the process (I knew there was a reason I married that guy!) but honestly, after ten minutes
of getting creative with my kid, I forgot all about my “long day” and remembered what was really important: being a parent! Keep your promises, no matter how tired, cranky or out of it your feel, because trust me; you’ll be awfully glad you did.

It’s not easy being a cop, it’s even harder to love and live with one. Do everything you can to maintain and improve those relationships that matter to you. Don’t expect your family to always adjust to you – you have to make allowances for them as well. Make sure they know that they are the priority. It’s not always easy, but it’s almost always incredibly rewarding. Stay safe.

About the Author

Sgt. Betsy Brantner Smith retired in 2009 as a 29-year veteran of a large metropolitan police department in the Chicago suburbs. Beginning her career as a police dispatcher at age 17, Betsy became an officer four years later and has held positions in patrol, investigations, narcotics, juvenile, hostage negotiation, crime prevention and field training. She received her four year degree from Western Illinois University in 1991, and was a class officer and graduate of the Northwestern University Center for Public Safety's School of Staff and Command in May of 2001.

As a sergeant, she supervised her department's K-9 Unit, served as a field training sergeant, recruitment team sergeant, bike patrol coordinator, Crowd Control Bike Team leader, and supervisor of the Community Education/Crime Prevention Unit. Betsy served on the Elderly Services Team, the Crisis Intervention Team, and was a proud founding supervisory member of NPD’s Honor Guard Unit. Betsy received numerous awards and commendations from her police department as well as many local and national awards for her performance as a police officer and supervisor.

From 1999 - 2003 Betsy hosted various programs and was a content expert for the Law Enforcement Television Network (LETN), is currently an on-air commentator and advisor for the Police One Academy and was a featured character in the Biography Channel’s “Female Forces” reality show.

She has been a law enforcement trainer for over 20 years and was a content expert and senior instructor for the Calibre Press "Street Survival" seminar from 2003 through 2012 where she also created the “Street Survival for Women” seminar. Betsy is a popular keynote speaker at conferences and events throughout the United States and has trained in various international venues. Since 1995, Betsy has authored hundreds of articles for law enforcement, government and civilian publications including Innovations in Government, Police Marksman, Law and Order, Police Chief, Law Officer, PoliceLink.com, PoliceOne.com, LawOfficer.com and various civilian firearms magazines through Harris Publications including “Combat Handguns.” She served on the advisory board of Police Marksman magazine and is currently a featured columnist and video contributor on both Officer.Com and PoliceOne.Com.

Betsy is the creator of the only course of its kind for women in law enforcement, “The Winning Mind for Women” and is owner of The Winning Mind LLC. Together, Betsy and her husband Dave develop and instruct cutting edge courses and travel extensively, bringing their inspirational messages throughout the world. Betsy can be reached through her website at www.femaleforces.com.