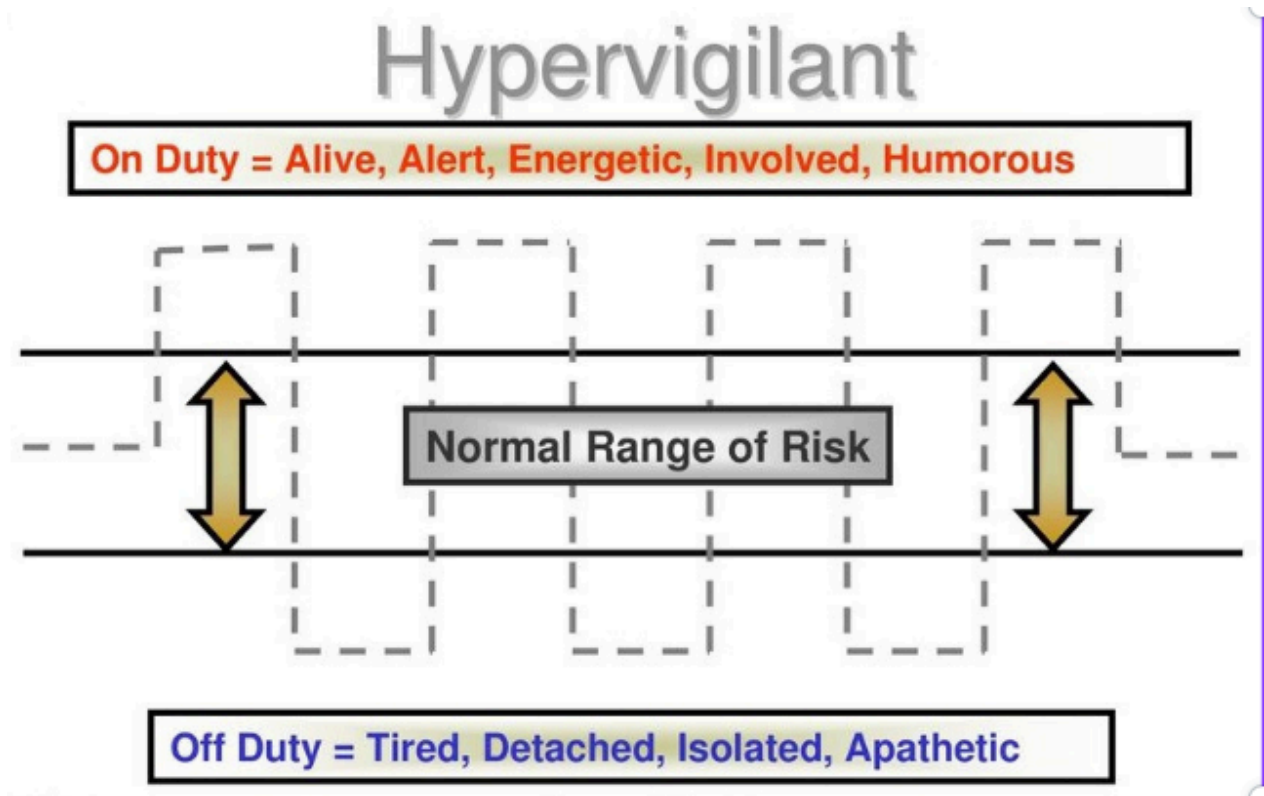


***The Hyper- and  
Hypo-vigilance  
Cycles and  
Their Effects in  
First  
Responders***



**Hypervigilance** is a survival mechanism that keeps first responders alert to potential threats. While useful on the job, staying in this heightened state after work hours can be mentally and physically draining.



Graph of hypervigilance cycle experienced by first responders

**Hypovigilance** is the body's response to prolonged stress, where the body and brain shuts down to conserve energy. This "numbness" is a coping mechanism for emotional overload. First responders hit this part of the cycle whenever they are off-duty

# Common feelings of first responders when off duty and where they fall within the cycle

1. Exhaustion - mental, physical, and emotional – **Hypovigilance**
2. Desire to avoid talking to anyone they don't have to – **Hypovigilance**
3. Avoiding talking on the phone at all costs – **Hypovigilance**
4. Not wanting to be social, just wanting to stay home – **Hypovigilance**
5. Being extra cautious about certain people and situations – **Hypervigilance**
6. Watching for any possible issues, suspicious people, or need to protect – **Hypervigilance**
7. Not having patience for long drawn-out stories, wanting people to get to the point – **Hypervigilance**
8. Trying to fix any problems someone presents rather than being able to just listen – **Hypervigilance**
9. Either avoidance of all true crime/dramatic/sad shows and movies or obsession with them – **Both** (Avoidance = Hypovigilance, Obsession = Hypervigilance)
10. Making choices, even very simple ones, becomes very difficult – **Hypovigilance**
11. FOMO in relation to what is happening at work while not there – **Hypervigilance**
12. Having little empathy for people and/or thinking everyone is stupid – **Hypovigilance**
13. Seeing people in only two categories: perpetrators or victims – **Hypervigilance**
14. Lack of motivation to do much more than basic life activities – **Hypovigilance**
15. Other people's problems seem small in comparison to what is heard/dealt with in a work day – **Hypovigilance**
16. Guilt about missing family events/celebrations – **Hypovigilance**
17. Not wanting to attend family events/celebrations in order to avoid passive-aggressive comments about missing them due to work – **Hypovigilance**
18. Not wanting to say what job you have in order to avoid the questions regarding the worst calls, or the worst things that have happened – **Hypovigilance**
19. Sacrificing much-needed sleep due to shift work in order to make sure family functions/time aren't missed – **Hypervigilance**
20. Overcompensating when spending time with family with treats/gifts to "make up" for time lost – **Hypovigilance**

# Hypervigilance: How It Manifests Over Time

## ✓ Common Patterns:

Increased irritability: Constant readiness can make patience thin, leading to frustration with "normal" life situations (e.g., impatience with long stories).

Work-identity fusion: Feeling like you're missing out on action at work can lead to an overattachment to the job.

Emotional blunting: A focus on protecting oneself from danger often means suppressing softer emotions like empathy.

Over-responsibility: Trying to "fix" every problem is an extension of needing control and solutions in emergency situations.

Sleep disruption: The inability to "turn off" the alert system can lead to poor-quality sleep and eventual burnout.

## ✓ Long-Term Effects:

Emotional exhaustion: Remaining on high alert drains mental resources, leading to burnout.

Relationship strain: Hypervigilance can make loved ones feel unheard or dismissed.

Physical toll: Chronic stress can result in headaches, hypertension, and gastrointestinal issues.

## ✓ Strategies to Mitigate Hypervigilance:

Scheduled Decompression Time: Designate 15-30 minutes after work to "offload" mentally—through meditation, journaling, or quiet time.

Body Regulation Techniques: Use breathing exercises (e.g., box breathing) to calm the nervous system and transition from work mode to home mode.

Boundaries with Work: Limit checking work-related messages when off duty

Grounding Practices: Engage in hobbies that require presence—gardening, crafts, or physical activities.

Therapeutic Support: Trauma-informed therapy (like EMDR) can address the need for control and constant alertness.

# Hypovigilance: How It Manifests Over Time

## **Common Patterns:**

Social withdrawal: Isolation feels safer than facing well-meaning but exhausting social interactions.

Decision fatigue: Small choices become overwhelming because the brain is overstimulated and under-rested.

Emotional numbness: Empathy may diminish as the mind protects itself from the emotional toll of work.

Avoidance: Skipping family events or avoiding questions about the job protects against reliving trauma.

Guilt/Overcompensation: Missing important moments can lead to compensating with gifts or forced positivity.

## **Long-Term Effects:**

Disconnection: Prolonged avoidance leads to loneliness and disconnection from loved ones.

Identity Loss: Constant detachment from personal life can cause a loss of self beyond the uniform.

Cognitive Fog: Chronic hypovigilance impairs memory, focus, and decision-making skills.

## **Strategies to Mitigate Hypovigilance:**

Intentional Socialization: Start with low-effort social connections (e.g., short walks with a friend) to rebuild social muscles.

Decision Simplicity: Minimize decision fatigue by creating routines for meals, clothing, and tasks.

Emotional Expression: Safe outlets (e.g., journaling, talking to a therapist, or expressive arts) can release suppressed feelings.

Restorative Rest: Prioritize high-quality sleep with a calming bedtime routine and limit shift work disruptions.

Pacing Engagement: Attend family events in manageable increments (e.g., "I'll stop by for an hour") to avoid overwhelm.



## **General Tools for Both Patterns:**

Peer Support Networks: Connect with others who understand the first-responder lifestyle to process shared experiences.

Mind-Body Practices: Yoga, tai chi, meditation, Reiki, cold plunges, sauna, or massage therapy can rebalance the body's stress response.

Mindful Transitions: Create rituals between work and home (changing clothes, taking a shower) to signal a mental shift.

Family Communication: Openly discuss the impact of your work and set realistic expectations with loved ones.

**Self-Compassion: Acknowledge that these responses are normal adaptations to an extraordinary job.**

## First Responder Vigilance Self-Assessment

**Instructions:** For each statement below, rate how often it applies to you on a scale from 0 to 4.

- 0 = Never
- 1 = Rarely
- 2 = Sometimes
- 3 = Often
- 4 = Almost Always

### Section 1: Hypervigilance

1. I feel on edge and constantly aware of my surroundings. ( )
2. I get impatient when people tell long or emotional stories. ( )
3. I feel the need to fix other people's problems instead of just listening. ( )
4. I am extra cautious around people or situations I perceive as a potential threat. ( )
5. I find it difficult to relax or "turn off" my work mindset when I'm at home. ( )
6. I worry about missing out on things happening at work when I'm off duty. ( )
7. I feel responsible for protecting others, even when I am not on the job. ( )
8. I struggle to sleep because my mind stays active and alert. ( )
9. I feel more comfortable being in control of situations. ( )

### Section 2: Hypovigilance

10. I avoid social situations and prefer to stay home. ( )
11. I feel emotionally numb or detached from others. ( )
12. I find it difficult to make decisions, even simple ones. ( )
13. I avoid discussing my work because I don't want to relive difficult experiences. ( )
14. I lack motivation to do anything beyond basic daily tasks. ( )
15. I feel other people's problems are small compared to what I handle at work. ( )
16. I find myself withdrawing from family events or gatherings. ( )
17. I feel exhausted mentally, physically, and emotionally most of the time. ( )
18. I overcompensate with gifts or special activities to make up for lost time. ( )

**Scoring:**

1. **Hypervigilance Score:** Add your responses for items 1-9: \_\_\_\_/36
2. **Hypovigilance Score:** Add your responses for items 10-18: \_\_\_\_/36

**Interpretation:**

- **0-9:** Minimal signs of hypervigilance or hypovigilance.
- **10-18:** Mild impact; consider monitoring your stress and coping mechanisms.
- **19-27:** Moderate impact; you may benefit from targeted coping strategies and professional support.
- **28-36:** Severe impact; it is advisable to seek professional help and implement stress-reducing techniques.

**Reflection Questions:**

1. Which section had the higher score for you?
2. How do these patterns affect your relationships and daily life?
3. What steps can you take to manage these experiences in a healthy way?

If your scores indicate moderate or severe impacts, consider reaching out to a mental health professional specializing in trauma or first responder well-being for additional support.