

# The Hypervigilance and Hypovigilance Cycle in 911 Dispatchers

## 1. Hypervigilance Phase

- **Heightened Awareness** – Dispatchers remain on high alert during their shifts, continuously monitoring multiple communication channels and responding to life-threatening situations.
- **Adrenaline Rush** – The body releases stress hormones to enhance focus, speed, and decision-making during emergency calls.
- **Sense of Purpose & Control** – Dispatchers feel a strong sense of responsibility, competence, and purpose in ensuring that callers and responders receive the assistance they need.

## 2. Hypovigilance Phase

- **Emotional & Physical Crash** – After a shift, the adrenaline drops, leading to feelings of exhaustion, emotional numbness, and mental fatigue.
- **Isolation & Withdrawal** – Dispatchers may feel the need to detach from family and friends, avoid social interactions, and struggle with motivation to engage in personal activities.
- **Mood Swings & Fatigue** – Irritability, mood swings, and trouble sleeping are common as the body and mind attempt to recover from prolonged stress.

## Long-Term Effects

- **Chronic Stress & Burnout** – Repeated exposure to this cycle can result in emotional exhaustion, diminished job performance, and increased absenteeism.
- **Mental Health Issues** – Dispatchers are at greater risk for anxiety, depression, PTSD, and substance use as a coping mechanism.
- **Strained Relationships** – Emotional withdrawal and communication challenges can create tension and distance in personal relationships, including with spouses, children, and friends.

## Breaking the Cycle

- **Self-Awareness & Training** – Recognizing the cycle and its effects can empower dispatchers to manage their responses and seek appropriate support.
- **Healthy Coping Strategies** – Regular physical movement, healthy social engagement, mindfulness practices, and professional counseling can help restore emotional balance.
- **Support Systems** – Strong social connections with family, friends, and peers provide emotional support and help mitigate the effects of the cycle.

## **The Impact of Hypovigilance on Family and Social Interaction**

The hypovigilance phase is the emotional and physical crash that follows prolonged periods of high alertness during a 911 dispatcher's shift. This phase significantly affects their relationships, particularly with family and close friends.

### **1. Emotional Detachment from Loved Ones**

- **Withdrawal from Family** – Dispatchers often feel emotionally drained after work, making it difficult to engage in meaningful conversations or show affection. Spouses and children may perceive this as disinterest or rejection.
- **Lack of Emotional Availability** – The dispatcher may struggle to express emotions or connect with their loved ones, leading to feelings of loneliness on both sides.
- **Numbness & Apathy** – After an intense shift, dispatchers may become emotionally "flat," making it hard to experience joy, empathy, or even frustration in normal family interactions. Decision fatigue is common, leading to the inability to make even small decisions.

### **2. Social Avoidance & Isolation**

- **Avoiding Social Events** – Dispatchers in the hypovigilance phase may decline invitations to gatherings, preferring solitude over social interaction.
- **Sense of Disconnection** – Since most people cannot relate to the dispatcher's experiences, they may feel alienated or misunderstood, leading to reluctance in opening up.
- **Preference for Fellow Dispatchers** – Dispatchers may gravitate toward colleagues who understand their experiences, unintentionally neglecting friendships outside the profession.

### **3. Increased Irritability & Mood Swings**

- **Short Temper & Frustration** – The crash from hypervigilance can result in irritability, making minor family conflicts seem overwhelming.
- **Unintended Emotional Outbursts** – Stress built up from work may be expressed in the home, sometimes leading to arguments or emotional distance.
- **Parental Struggles** – Children may not understand why their parent is suddenly quiet, irritable, or disengaged, causing emotional strain in the household.

### **4. Impact on Marriages & Intimate Relationships**

- **Communication Breakdown** – Spouses may feel shut out as the dispatcher struggles to express emotions or discuss their work.

- **Decreased Intimacy** – Emotional exhaustion and stress can lead to a lack of affection or interest in intimacy, potentially creating distance in the relationship.
- **Increased Risk of Divorce** – Over time, the ongoing cycle of emotional withdrawal can erode the relationship, leading to misunderstandings, resentment, and marital strain.

## 5. How to Counteract These Effects

- **Open Communication** – Dispatchers should practice discussing their feelings and experiences in a way that allows their loved ones to understand without overwhelming them.
- **Structured Downtime** – Scheduling specific time for family activities and relaxation can help reconnect with loved ones.
- **Mental Health Support** – Therapy, peer support groups, and stress management techniques can help dispatchers regulate their emotions.
- **Physical Activity & Hobbies** – Engaging in exercise, outdoor activities, or creative hobbies can provide an outlet for stress and improve mood.