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The Key to a Happy Police Family is a Happy Police Marriage:

by Hal Brown

But what happens when your police husband needs to change?

I watched an infamous episode of the Simpsons the other day about Marge's fear of flying and about how, with free airline tickets, Homer was finally convinced to see a psychiatrist with Marge. He began the session lamenting about how therapists always blame the husband. The psychiatrist reassured him with the utmost sincerity as to her objectivity, but as she did so you could see her write, and underline twice, the following word on her notepad: **husband**.

Recently a major study of happiness in marriage demonstrated that the happiest marriages for both spouses were the ones where the husbands generally gave in to their wives' wishes, even when there was a conflict.

And then, we have **police marriage**. I have seen more law enforcement couples in therapy than I can count and am here to tell you that when the husband is a police officer, he isn't **always** the one to blame for problems in the marriage. **Blame** you say! I thought therapists were supposed to be objective and give that speech about taking a balanced view of relationships and conflicts and that there's never a clear-cut case of one spouse being at fault while the other gets off scott free. Sure, one spouse can look like a louse, but shrinks are always throwing around terms like enabler and co-dependency these days to describe the role of the non-louse spouse in marital dysfunction. But what do you suppose marriage counselors talk about when they get together? About how objective they are when they work with these couples? Hell no. They talk about why the hell the wife puts up with the so-and-so, because his chauvinism is so ingrained that he'll never change. And among those therapists who have an anti-police bias, well you can imagine what they think of the male police officer who may have a hint of the authoritarian personality.

The good news is that there's hope. I find that the best predictor of success in a troubled, or merely a troubling, marriage (police or civilian) is whether both the husband and wife are willing to own up to their responsibility for needing to change. And like others have said in articles and columns here, a police officer being more open and self-disclosing with his spouse is very important. While police marriages are susceptible to all the ills that beset non-police marriages, theirs are indeed unique for all the reasons spelled out here on Police Wives. When male police officers make the call to arrange for therapy to work on changing themselves, and the marriage, I usually take it as a good sign because it shows his motivation. Though sometimes they do this on the threat of dire consequences if they don't. When wives drag their police husbands in kicking and screaming (or sulking and silent) it isn't the end of the marriage. It is my responsibility as a

therapist and marriage counselor to coach him into husband material, to help bring back the man you married before police stress took its toll on him, and to help the two of you work together to become the partners you once were. My job with your husband is:

to help him listen to the emotional as well as the surface messages conveyed by his wife (and children, too);

to understand how not expressing his feelings about disturbing incidents on the job hurts rather than helps a marriage;

to help him learn the language of feelings, that is, to put into words emotions he may not even be aware that he has.

It isn't a hopeless task, because the very fact that he came to counseling is a plus. The prognosis for the marriage is even better when he comes back a second time. And he almost always does. When do I find the wives bear a large part of the responsibility for the slide into the ho-hum "we might as well just be roommates" kind of police marriages I sometimes see in my practice? Guess?

Motherhood sometimes does it, or other new interests, or the wearing off of the thrill of courtship. But when sexual enthusiasm diminishes on the part of the wife, that vital part of love and intimacy is lost. Police officer husbands need to feel loved just like anyone else, and sex is a part of marital love. So, if there's a problem in the sexual relationship, it needs to be resolved, whether it is a variance in the level of need or learning just what **really** excites your spouse. As with so much else that makes a marriage endure and grow stronger, the key to achieving sexual compatibility is open, forthright (but never hostile) communication combined with the willingness to be flexible and experiment.

Not every police marriage is limping along leaving a trail of blood and body parts. In fact, most are thriving. And in truth, backtracking on how I began this column (okay, I admit I was trying to get your attention), when there are problems in a marriage the very concept of blame is counter-productive. Both husbands and wives need to understand that marriage is the most complex of human relationships and conflicts never develop without the involvement of both spouses.

Police Stress Book Review

I Love a Cop

by **Ellen Kirschman, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist**

Ellen Kirschman's twenty years as a police therapist based in Oakland, California provides rich fodder for this no-holds-barred analysis of police stress. She has tremendous empathy for the police spouse and isn't afraid to risk alienating those officers who read her book. Yet she also has an obvious deep feeling for police officers themselves and is never malicious in her critique of their self-destructive behaviors.

Using examples from her clinical practice, she shows how police officers and their families need to overcome many problems, not the least of which is the officer's own denial, to survive and thrive. Every topic she covers (and she doesn't miss any I could spot) is illustrated with real life human, sometimes humdrum (at least when compared to television cop shows), drama. I mean this as a compliment. Even television shows like *Homicide* and *NYPD Blue* which try to depict police stress and try to make cops look human, always succumb and go over-the-top occasionally. The true stories Kirschman tells are ones you can relate to.

This important contribution to police stress literature covers everything from organizational stress to critical incidents, with helpful hints throughout. She has a description of a make believe police department from hell that is too long to quote here (pages 52-53), but it is a classic which starts with "labor and management are at odds over working conditions and benefits," and concludes with "the chief is angry at being misquoted by the media, and everyone is angry with the chief." She makes the points I've often described as losing years of hard-earned savings in a supposedly secure bank account in her section on departmental disciplinary action aptly titled "One sin is worth a thousand good deeds".

In a comprehensive and compassionate look at critical incidents and police stress, she includes the often-ignored family, noting that "behind the primary trauma victim are the nearly invisible family members, friends, and co-workers whose lives are also deeply affected by the trauma - but for whom few services exist." She rightly emphasizes that the depth and severity of one's reaction is really individual ("in the eyes of the beholder"), an observation that must be heeded lest we minimize the impact a trauma has on our friends and loved ones. Clinically Kirschman states unequivocally throughout what I have been writing about here: what you resist, persists. And she isn't afraid to nail the police subculture, which emphasizes macho silence over human self-disclosure. Any police counselor and most police spouses know how destructive this is psychologically. Writing about a client:

"I encouraged Chris to go home and tell his wife what happened. When he returned the next week, he felt much better for having talked to her. We both could see a pattern: What he resisted, persisted. The more he talked, the better he felt. Sharing this incident with his wife helped him to feel less guilty about loving a dangerous profession that entailed risk and potential loss for his family and his children. His wife was able to tell him that she was more upset by the emotional distance he created by keeping things to himself than by the less likely probability that he would be killed in the line of duty."

Kirschman on the blood and guts aspect of the job and how family members need to understand what it's like to come home to a family "crisis":

"Don't be surprised if your cop cannot relate to family life because everything seems minor or trivial in comparison with what he or she was just been though or witnessed. An officer who has just seen a child cut in half by a train may have little sympathy for a scraped knee. This is temporary and not intentionally done to hurt anyone. Gently bring it to his or her attention."

A much needed candid chapter on police domestic abuse "pulls no punches" while explaining clearly how the macho subculture, the daily authoritarian role expected and needed on the job, can develop into a need to control the family. Add a lack of understanding how what rates a 1 on a 10 scale of escalating force on the street will be a 7 at home, and an officer can end up as a domestic abuser. I have had a number of police clients arrested for leaving bruises on their wives arms when they were restraining their wives from hitting them. These cases were eventually dismissed, but the point is that the officer thought he was using minimal force based on what he would do on the street.

It is a shame that I feel the need to characterize the chapter called "Swimming Upstream", which is about the "special challenges facing women, minorities, lesbians and gay men in law enforcement" as daring. But given that law enforcement in the United State was primarily a white Anglo-Saxon male bastion up until not that long ago, it isn't surprising that there are still white male heterosexual officers who will dismiss everything else Kirschman says when they get to this at page 197 because of old prejudices. Too bad. Male police officers need to hear things like this:

"As with women, gay men are presumed to lack such manly attributes as courage, bravery, and loyalty. And like women, when they demonstrate courage and competence, they threaten the notion that only "manly" men can do police work."

The book is an important contribution not only to the literature on police stress and the police marriage and family, but also to police stress in general. Police officers, male in particular, should not shy away from it because of the title. Unfortunately the book is most likely to be brought home by spouses, and most of these will be police wives. And it will be strategically placed so husbands will see it. And some wives will even hint that perhaps hubbies should read it. For those of you reading this now: don't be put off because this book is called "I Love a Cop". This is one of the best books on police stress out there and reading it will give you insight into how police stress effects both you and your loved ones.

Kirschman, Ellen; *I Love a Cop: What Police Families Need to Know*, Guilford Press, New York, 1997, 292 pages.

Why do police officers have such an outlandish rate of marital and domestic failure and calamity?

by Police Chief Chuck Pratt (Retired)

Why **do** peace officers have such an outlandish rate of marital and domestic failure and calamity? These are the main causes:

The psychological makeup of a great many officers drives them to experiment, search, and seek adventures. Which means that they are fundamentally driven towards playing around, infidelities of various kinds.

Vast numbers of women start out by being attracted to cops (my own experience indicates, toward a uniform). The symbolism of the weapon and badge are believed to be strong attractions. That magnetism they readily communicate to the members of the opposite sex who, all too frequently, either cannot or don't even try to resist.

With many men, the number of conquests about which they can brag is of great importance to ego building. (This is sometimes true of women, as well, although they are usually less braggadocio about it since we still teach our young girls a little modesty.)

It is extremely hard for anyone to avoid "adventures" when attractive members of the opposite sex are openly, persistently inviting.

Think about the hours these people work, the neighborhoods in which they work which are commonly a distance from home (where they may not be recognized by family and friends) and therefore can "get away with it" with little chance of being caught.

In other words, the average cop is continuously exposed to temptation with only limited likelihood of getting caught.

To go back a little, let me tell you that about two years after I got into law enforcement (we mostly protected against dinosaurs in those days) I did a little non-scientific, informal survey of the PD in the city where I served and found that of all the officers on the force, 80% were divorced within 3 years after being hired, remarried within less than a year and within two more years about 70% were again divorced.

Informal interviews and daily observations indicated that nearly all were first divorced due to infidelities, married the woman with whom the infidelities occurred and then divorced her in favor of yet another woman with whom they were "playing around".

Within a 20 to 25 year career span, it was not and still is not particularly unusual for an officer to go through 6 or 8 marriages. And, oddly enough, they rarely shack up unless it is with another officer.

Unfortunately, women who are often thrilled by dating an officer become fascinated by the profession and--as in your case--look to marriage with the officer.

Unfortunately, this simply leads to double-trouble in many cases as each member of this union is now subject to frequent temptations and opportunities for infidelities with either other officers or the many civilians whom they contact. Which makes it doubly difficult to keep the marriage together unless they are capable of sitting down, one on one for a very heartfelt discussion before the marriage during which they set up the "rules" for their marriage and develop a clear-cut understanding of the agreed upon reaction to the breaking of those rules.

When both parties to the marriage are cops, they have a lot in common and often come to a deeper understanding of each than do "civilian" couples. But it is a rough row to hoe.

As Chief I made it a rule to invite every candidate for employment to come to dinner at my home and spend the evening in a relaxed atmosphere where we could get acquainted. In addition, if he had a wife or fiancée, we asked that she come along, as well as children, if any.

While it gave me a great chance to find out what the candidate was all about, it also gave my wife time to take the candidate's lady aside for a good, long heart to heart during which she could advise the younger woman (usually) what it is to be a cop's wife, what she would have to put up with from the job and from her cop-husband. In the meantime, she could size up how well the woman was prepared and how solidly she was behind her better half.

As a result, we did not hire a number of young men who might have made good cops but who we believed would do so at the expense of their families. A cost, which I felt, was far too great.

By the way, we occasionally run into these former candidates and most are better off in other jobs and their families, nearly all, remain intact.

I've been accused of playing god, as a result of that practice. But I feel that it was best for the department, best for the candidate and his family and best for me.

Studies indicate that cops--as a work group--have the poorest records of maintaining marriages, a very high record of on the job injury, one of the highest rates of suicide after retirement. They also have a dangerously high rate of alcohol abuse both during their careers and after retirement.

My suggestion to those dating a police officer, then, is to consider and discuss all of these factors with an open mind.