

# Supporting Officer Safety Through Family Wellness: **Communication in Officer Families**

Effective communication is the cornerstone of a healthy family. The policing profession offers unique challenges which may create stress, confusion, fear, and a variety of other emotions that can cause barriers to healthy communication between officers and their loved ones. Below are strategies for overcoming challenges and building healthy communication in police families:

## How Communication May Look Different in Policing Families



**Focusing on the Facts:** Prioritizing important details and quickly gathering all the facts and circumstances are common strategies in police work. This style of communication can make an officer appear dismissive or uninterested in conversations at home.



**Agency culture:** Officers may fear criticism from peers for sharing their emotions at work, leaving the home as the main environment for processing job-related stressors.



**Tone of voice:** While maintaining control in situations on the job, an officer's tone may sound serious or direct. This tone can unintentionally spill over to off-duty discussions and be misinterpreted.



**Hypervigilance:** Officers may feel a sense of hypervigilance due to heightened awareness of potential dangers.<sup>1</sup> This is due to an increased level of cortisol causing heightened stress and awareness in the body. This trait is a conditioned behavior and can appear in off-duty situations.



**Emotional armor:** Officers sometimes use "emotional armor" to protect themselves from the stress and physiological impact of their work. This behavior can make the officer appear closed off at home.

## What Does Active Listening Look Like?

- Active listening is a method of communication involving intently listening, engaging, and demonstrating various non-verbal cues with the person who is speaking. Active listening not only makes the speaker feel heard and valued, it reduces the risk of miscommunication.
- **Body Language:** Nodding your head, facing the person, and appearing engaged.
- **Speech:** Asking open-ended questions, summarizing what you are hearing, and taking turns speaking.
- Only offer solutions to the problem if the other individual asks. Focus on what the speaker wants to share and gather all the information.
- Utilize "I" statements as opposed to "You" statements. "You" statements can create defensiveness, place blame, and are often negative. "I" statements place responsibility on the speaker, offer a rationale, and feel less threatening. Composing "I" statements may include, "I feel/think/am [thought/feeling] when [rationale]. I would like/prefer/rather [solution]."



<sup>1</sup> The Effects of Hypervigilance on Decision-Making during Critical Incidents. Journal of the NPS Center for Defense and Homeland Security. September 2018.

# Effective Communication Strategies for Officers and their Families

The following chart includes strategies for active listening. Considerations are included for officers and family members, but many of these strategies can be used interchangeably.



Communication Strategy	Officer	Family Member
<b>Listen</b>	<b>Actively listen to what the other person is saying rather than planning how you will respond.</b> Avoid the “yes, but...” phrase when responding as it appears dismissive.	<b>Ask clarifying questions and gather context during discussions.</b>
<b>Validate</b>	<b>Ensure the speaker feels validated.</b> Repeat what the speaker is saying to demonstrate you have received the message and they are being heard.	<b>Recognize that your officer may appear direct or stern, rather than emotionally validating.</b> Practice active listening skills when your family member is speaking and speak honestly about your emotions during the conversation.
<b>Show empathy</b>	<b>Identify the social cues of others and be wary of using empathy inappropriately.</b> Do not minimize their feelings or compare your own experiences directly to theirs if the experiences are not of the same magnitude.	<b>Communicate with your officer when you feel misunderstood or emotionally isolated.</b> He or she might experience difficult or traumatic experiences on the job. Although you might not directly identify with the situation, acknowledge that you hear the speaker and are willing to listen.

## Creating Boundaries and Respecting Them

It is important to understand the difference between communication barriers and boundaries.

Mutually developing boundaries can assist people with understanding appropriateness regarding topics, timing, and places to have a discussion. This can alleviate conflict or unintended emotional distress during an already difficult conversation. While boundaries can be helpful, putting up barriers can emotionally isolate yourself and those around you.

- Identify when and where it is appropriate to talk about work-related topics and/or potential stressors. Conversations should be out of a child’s earshot when appropriate.
- Your partners and family members can be effective listeners but should have their own coping mechanisms and support in place for potentially stressful topics.
- Policing or aspects of your job may come up in social situations with friends and/or family members. Consider identifying strategies to politely deflect the conversation if you are not comfortable talking about it.

## Finding Balance in Sharing

While it is valuable to share information about your day, understand that it is helpful to evaluate the nature of the content and your relationship with the other individuals prior to sharing with those outside the profession.



Conversation Components	Officer	Family Member
<b>Tackling difficult topics</b>	<b>Consider prompting potentially heavy conversations with family members with a “check-in.”</b> Ask them if they are willing to hear about details that may be stressful or if another time would be more appropriate.	<b>Family members are encouraged to establish their own forms of processing and support</b> through social support groups, mindfulness practices, and low-stress hobbies.
<b>Processing emotions</b>	<b>Be honest about your capacity to receive or talk about work-related topics with family members.</b> Explain that you may be open to discussing your work in the future when you’re in a more positive mental space.	<b>Research if the agency extends officer resources</b> such as peer support and Employee Assistance Programs to family members.
<b>Shutting out those around you</b>	<b>Recognize that shutting out a family member completely</b> may be detrimental to the relationship and the mental health of the other individual, even if you want to protect them.	<b>Demonstrate patience with your officer</b> when he or she appears emotionally closed off. If the officer is resistant to talking, approach at a later time.

## Coping and Communication

While communication is indispensable, a sense of connection and value is equally important to encourage and support a healthy relationship.

- Identify bonding activities that foster positivity and gratefulness between family members.
- Plan activities in environments that help you unwind and de-stress.
- Dedicate specific time throughout the month to spend with members of your support system.

## Additional Resources

IACP’s [Officer Safety and Wellness](#) Page

This publication is one in a series. For more family support resources please visit: [www.theiacp.org/OSW](http://www.theiacp.org/OSW)