



# The Criminal Mind

## Identifying with criminals is an occupational hazard

**Y**ou've just arrived home from work and drop into your easy chair. Your spouse asks you about going to a small gathering of friends coming up this weekend, and you ask who'll be there. Your spouse provides the names. You smirk and say, "Sounds like the usual group of squares and idealists. I don't think so."

Your spouse is frustrated: "What were you hoping for, a bunch of cops?"

"Look, I just don't enjoy being around people who don't get it. Eventually they get around to asking me some questions about my work. Then, when I begin describing what I see people doing every day, they give me that look, like they really don't believe me. Then someone starts complaining about a traffic ticket they got from some unfair cop. Why hang out with people who are so naive and unreal? It's just a hassle."

### The Criminal Mind

In prior issues, I've addressed various conditions unique to law enforcement that can mold an officer's personality: limited perspective syndrome, exposure to the extremes of life, the necessary development of command presence and the noble, but dangerous, commitment to the job above all other relationships. These conditions have the potential to make you a cynical, calloused and obnoxious controller, and they will damage important personal relationships, unless recognized and appropriately addressed. In this issue, I discuss another adaptation most officers experience—*identifying with the criminal mind*.

To deal with criminals, anticipate their actions and interrogate them, police must understand how criminals think. Many

officers actually have more interaction with criminals than law-abiding citizens. They learn criminal language, lifestyles and thinking, all of which can be advantageous in their work. However, there is some hazard in becoming immersed in a dysfunctional thinking pattern.

Many criminals despise law-abiding citizens, whom they'll call any number of pejorative names. Criminals often have overinflated estimations of themselves. They view laws and rules as applying to everyone but themselves: They are above the law. They view people who are submissive to authority as "stupid," and they have a compulsion to outwit, overpower and dominate others. Those less self-centered are "dumb" or "easy marks."

To a criminal, other people have value only if they can be used, owned or exploited. On the contrary, being noble or kind is an indication of weakness and ignorance. To the criminal, good behavior demonstrates an unrealistic evaluation of the true nature of mankind. They can't understand someone wanting to help another unselfishly.

Police work gives officers experiences that can seem to support a criminal's outlook. We regularly see people at their worst (e.g., self-centered exploiters), and optimistic, kind people can begin to seem idealistic and uninformed. Officers can develop an "us-vs.-them" mentality. Those outside our profession, who don't share our mentality, can be seen as "bleeding hearts" who don't understand life as it is. This can lead to what psychologists call "in-grouping." Some officers feel comfortable only around other officers—and criminals.

In the extreme, officers can actually begin feeling more at ease talking with criminals than normal friends. At least the criminal knows and

understands the stark realities of the world the officer deals with. This adaptation can be more profound and accelerated if the officer is working as an undercover assignment.

### What Can Be Done

The phenomena I describe rarely lead to the officer becoming criminal or corrupt, but they often lead to an unhealthy isolation and a one-sided view of life. Family and friends can feel as though their spouse, friend or relative is slipping away. They witness changes in the officer that they don't understand. Following are ways to recognize and avoid identification with the criminal mind:

1. Understand and appreciate the powerful negative impact that "getting into the criminal mind" can have on you.
2. Discuss this issue with effective, successful colleagues who are realistic, but have some hope. Seek their advice.
3. Discuss this article with those who are important to you. Don't be afraid to describe your fears, concerns and disappointments. Be a good listener. Ask questions to ensure you understand their reaction to this phenomenon.

As a cop, I witnessed things that I wish I could forget. One hazard of our profession is seeing too much, knowing too much and, along with the criminal, viewing life cynically. This view destroys much of the realistic hope that we must have to make positive contributions to our profession.—On Point **LOM**

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