Chapter 2
Swimming Upstream:
The First Responder’s Marriage

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ABSTRACT
First responders maintain strong marriages in spite of the potential negative impact of multiple stressors including schedule conflicts, financial strain, and the threat of illness, disability, and death. Patterns of thought and behavior that are beneficial at work, such as vigilance, rapidly establishing control, and shutting off emotional responding cause problems at home, particularly when intensified by trauma. Excessive belief in a partner’s heroism and the choice by some responders of dependent romantic partners cause other problems, as does the sometimes culturally sanctioned practice of coping through alcohol use or sexual encounters. Shifts in perspective that reframe common concerns more positively are offered. Departments are encouraged to increase efforts to support spouses and marriages, given the importance of close relationships to health.

INTRODUCTION
The influential assumption that first responders have higher divorce rates than the general population is widespread. Available evidence suggests that on the contrary, police and fire marriages are more stable than those of the general population. The rate of divorce was 16.4% in the general population in the 2000 census, but 14.1% for firefighters, 15.0% for police, and 23.9% for dispatchers (McCoy and Aamodt, 2010). Rates for police first-line supervisors and detectives were under thirteen percent, and for first-line fire supervisors, under nine percent. Jahnke (2015) reviewed 2008 data showing that 33% of married U. S. adults had experienced at least one divorce: Her sample of 1456 firefighters found 24.4% of married men and 27.3% of married women had experienced at least one previous divorce. Among all sample respondents, single and married, twenty percent of men and forty percent of women had been divorced.

Responders are typically hired with clean records concerning violence, substance abuse, and legal trouble, increasing their likelihood of showing emotional stability and staying married. Law enforcement officers, but not other responders, take pre-employment psychological examinations to assess...
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their stability. Marital satisfaction is attainable, although career-related stress and negative patterns of interaction, like strong currents, threaten to push couples apart.

This chapter focuses on common challenges to responder marriages and other relationships, although for brevity the terms spouse and marriage are used throughout. Unrealistic initial expectations, career-related stressors, and acquired patterns of thought and behavior that support functioning at work but prove ineffective or harmful at home are examined. These issues are not present in all marriages or relationships, and where present, may be highly significant or minor. Practical recommendations for clinicians and departments follow. Commonalities are emphasized; space does not permit addressing important differences between and within subgroups, e.g., firefighters tend to be a younger population than police officers. It should be noted that the scant research and clinical literature on responder relationships often focuses on white male responders with female spouses who are not first responders themselves. The material here may be less relevant to other pairings.

EXPECTATIONS OF A HERO

In healthy responder marriages, support and respect are mutual. Spouses take genuine pride in the responder’s career and are glad he or she has meaningful work, while their efforts are valued in return. Career-related stressors are accepted in light of the responder’s altruism and personal fulfillment and the couple’s civic-mindedness. In fact, cognitive dissonance theory predicts that the more the career negatively impacts couple or family life, the more family members will value it, in order to rationalize their loved ones’ continued involvement. This is especially true for the half of firefighters who are volunteers, who take on the risks and unpredictable call-ups without the justification of a paycheck. To the extent that responders engage in altruistic activities at considerable risk to themselves, they are legitimately heroes (Patton, Smith, & Lilienfeld, 2018).

All responder relationships must respond to a question: Are responders selfless public servants with superhuman courage or ordinary men and women doing a difficult job? An exaggerated belief in the responder’s heroism sets up expectations that his or her work is more important than the spouse’s, and that his or her needs will be more important as well. It also suggests that invulnerable heroes will bear burdens silently and alone, as is celebrated in the cultural narrative surrounding heroes (Zuckerman, 2015). Both parties in these relationships may expect the spouse to take a secondary role in fighting the couple’s battles.

In fact, a conspiracy of silence characterizes many responder marriages. Both responder and spouse protect each other by failing to disclose their fears about the career. Responders also shield civilian family members from graphic details of their work. They are protecting themselves as much as their spouses, by keeping the home a sanctuary that is untouched by violence, loss and death. Regrettably, the omissions often create a gap between the partners.

In contrast, colleagues become a second family. The shared experience and camaraderie of the police or fire station is attractive to job-seekers. Once the career begins, peers buffer the impact of stress and trauma (Bohl-Penrod & Clark, 2017). Meyer, et al. (2012) found the presence of social support (likely to be emotional and instrumental) and other factors, not level of exposure to potentially traumatic events, seemed to determine the development of PTSD in firefighters. Like other traumatized groups, each responder profession experiences “shared stress,” defined as “the feeling that you have to manage ev-