



## How Being a Cop Broke My Brain

Hey there! Welcome to That Dang Dad, my name is Phil, and tonight I want to return to a topic I haven't done a video on in awhile: law enforcement. If you're new to the channel, you should know that I was a police officer for nearly a decade in a pretty rowdy part of California. In the years since then, I have become a police and prison abolitionist, meaning that I believe the entire concept of police forces and prisons is not reformable and must be replaced by a system that is more compassionate, more just, and more committed to dignity and meeting human needs. I'll put a link in the description if you want to see me do a deeper dive on this topic.

Tonight though, I want to set aside the academic texts and the philosophy and all that nerd shit, and I want to get personal about how my time as a cop really fucked my brain up. Tonight we're going to be talking about state violence and some nasty stuff cops see in the line of duty, so if you're not in the mood for blood and guts and man's inhumanity to man, you might wanna skip this one.

There's nothing cops love more than captivating a crowd with an exciting war story, so I'll begin with one of my own. So there I was, Saturday night, M4 assault rifle in hand, monitoring the perimeter of a housing complex in the middle of the neighborhood. Our gang unit had been tracking an armed and dangerous gangster wanted for murder and had seen him enter the middle property of a triplex, where his family was hiding him. We quietly evacuated the two end properties and prepared to make a, ah, dynamic entry, as they say. "This is the police, come out with your hands up!" no answer, in go the flashbangs and the tear gas canisters.

After a moment, the gang unit radio'd that the gangster had climbed up into the attic and that the attic was accessible to the two end properties as well as the middle. I was tasked with standing at the doorway of the south unit in case he tried to sneak out that way. I was reminded he was armed, dangerous, and had already killed.

So there I stood as the gang unit began to throw more tear gas into the attic, waiting to see if this guy was going to drop down right in front of me. And I did what I'd been trained to do. I visualized shooting him in the chest until he stopped moving. Over and over and over again.

I pictured him crashing through the ceiling, I pictured him sneaking around a corner, I pictured him running at me, I pictured him shooting at me, I pictured him wounding me, and every time, I pictured firing until the threat had been eliminated. I don't know how many times I annihilated this guy in my mind palace... forty... fifty times?

And it's not because I hated this guy or really wanted to score my first kill on the job. It was because I wasn't quite sure I could actually do it. I was taking a page out of Dave Grossman's training, psyching myself up and convincing myself that yes, I could kill someone else if I had to. After all, he was armed, he was dangerous, he'd already killed... What option did I have?

Ultimately, blinded by and choking on tear gas, he fell through the roof of the middle unit directly in front of our K9 unit. Did you know dogs aren't incapacitated by tear gas? The gangster and I both learned this right about the same time and it was... a bad night for him.

After that, I put all my gear back in my cop car, took a quick drink, and resumed my shift, off to go break up loud parties and referee marital disputes and chase away teens on a would-be beer run. All that violent energy I'd been working with, all that visualization of hurting and killing someone, poof... away it goes. Off to the next call!

I tell you this story because it's emblematic of much of my law enforcement career. When I first started out, I was criticized for being meek, timid, and too slow to show dominance out in the field. I was taught that showing that kind of weakness on calls would make me a target for attack. I was shown hundreds of videos of cops being murdered on routine calls for service, often by assailants who didn't look like killers.

At the same time, on my days off, I was training in krav maga alongside many other cops as well as military veterans. Krav training is extremely aggressive and it too often touches on mindset. We trained on how to fight a carjacker inside your own car. We trained on last ditch techniques to disarm someone about to shoot you execution style. One night, the instructor made us fight while cradling a baby doll in one arm representing our own kid. The point was that you never knew what awful situation might be coming your way.

Over time, I internalized this message: at any given time, someone out there is going to hurt you if you're not ready to hurt them first. If you let your guard down for even a second, they'll kill you. In the police business, this is the way we talk about Officer Safety. The most respected veteran officers I worked with were the ones stopping the young guys from running around blind corners, they were the ones asking if we'd searched that dumpster before we turned our back on it. You got the sense these guys had Seen Things and knew how to keep each other safe.

And, you got the sense from listening to their stories that the big thing you can do to protect yourself on the job is to mentally prepare for That Day. And since you never know in what form the attack will take, it's best to just run scenarios in your head constantly, building those mental pathways so that when it finally does happen, you'll know exactly what to do.

So that's what I trained my brain to do on duty. I drove around and imagined. What if a guy with a gun popped out of the back of that car right now and shot at me? What if I see a man with a knife running down that alley? What would I do if a plane crashed into city hall? Over time, my brain began to do this off-duty as well. I wouldn't sit in restaurants with my back to the front door so I could monitor everyone coming in. I walked through mall parking lots with my head on a swivel. I stared down people who looked out of place so they'd know I'd seen them.

I was constantly in a state of vigilance. Not concern, just vigilance. My krav instructor used the color code system to talk about emotional states (y'know... white, yellow, orange, black) and he used to say you should never leave the house without being at least at a code yellow, that you should never be in a state of total relaxation in public.

And I never was! And to this day, I never am!

It's been a long time since my cop days now, but this hypervigilance has never left me. And what at one time felt like a survival tool I was proud of now just makes me exhausted (and probably exhausting to be around). I hate leaving my house, I don't like to go out and do things with lots of people. If it's too loud and crowded somewhere, I feel like I'm not in control, like I'm not safe, sometimes I even dissociate just little bit, as a treat.

But even worse than hypervigilance, the thing I can't turn off is my imagination. Not only did law enforcement train me to imagine a thousand horrible events, law enforcement also involved my participation in a thousand horrible events. I have seen bodies riddled with bullets, stabbing victims crawling through their own blood, I've seen car accidents render the driver... unrecognizable, and I've seen children horrifically abused and even killed.

So, even long after my cop days, my brain will conjure up, unbidden, a "Hey, what if THIS happened?". What if a home invader breaks in and takes you hostage? What if your partner drives off a bridge? What if there's a mass shooting in this theater? All kinds of stuff. And for awhile, I could tell myself I was just being... prepared! Mass shootings happen all the time in the US, why shouldn't I mentally prepare?

(I wrote this line after the Buffalo shooting but before the Uvalde shooting.)

It wasn't until my daughter was born that I realized, actually, what I was doing maybe wasn't normal.

All new parents experience fears and the what-ifs, but I spent the first year and a half of my daughter's life in an almost daily battle with my own mind. It was a CONSTANT onslaught of the most horrible what-if scenarios you can imagine, so bad I won't even describe them to you. Every night, I had to fight my brain to go to sleep. Breathing exercises, meditations, rain sounds, sleep stories, melatonin, CBD, ANYTHING that would just shut off the projector. It's a minor miracle I didn't end up abusing alcohol very much during that time because some nights, a big glass of scotch was a really easy way to tell my brain to shut the fuck up.

I was looking into therapy at one point and then COVID hit and between that and budget stuff, I basically gave up on that idea for the time being. After some research, I ended up buying a self-guided CBT workbook (not that kind, the other kind) and doing exercises in that for awhile, and believe it or not, it kind of helped?? I don't know if it was just feeling like I had an outlet to work on it that helped or whether I just got less anxious over time as my daughter stayed healthy and happy, but I'm in a much better place today than I was two years ago.

I'll even give you one of my tricks in case you need it. When I catch my thoughts start to race down a bad path and I realize I'm mentally rehearsing for tragedy, I'll say to myself, out loud, "You don't need to rehearse right now, you'll know what to do if it happens." Or sometimes, if the thought is really atrocious, I will say out loud to myself "This is a fucking stupid thing to obsess over. We're going to think about a new topic now." Believe it or not, that tends to work. Something about saying it out loud makes for a nice thought pattern reboot, who knows why.

So, why am I telling you all this? Is it to generate sympathy for cops? Absolutely not, ACAB forever. Is it to scare away young people from becoming cops? No, but i'll take it??

I think one reason I wanted to talk about it was as a way of explaining why so many cops behave the way they do and why they seem to feel a sense of entitlement about being exonerated after, say, shooting an unarmed person or refusing to run into a school shooting to save children. I am not the only person to have their brain broken by policework; many of the people to whom that happened are.... still cops! That hypervigilance, those obsessive thoughts about danger around every corner, that's part of law enforcement culture. That's part of the training, that's part of the mentoring, it's woven into the DNA of how cops operate every day.

That's why there's the almost unbridgeable gulf between a normal person who says, like "Why did you punch that guy 37 times for having his hands in his pockets?", and the cop who replies "Because I didn't know what was in there, it could have been a knife or a gun or a jar of battery acid he was going to throw in my face and I didn't want to take the chance." I guarantee you, that cop was at a seminar one time where some old head told a war story about his partner Bob Sacamano who actually did get battery acid thrown in his face.

There are approximately 900,000 police officers in the United States and I'm willing to bet the vast majority of them were trained like I was and have the same mental pathways I have. That's a lot of armed, unaccountable people running around fantasizing about being executed in the streets every day.

And yes, this may inspire some sympathy in you for these cops. I don't think it's a coincidence that cops endure this abusive working mode and then often turn to alcohol abuse and even more notoriously child and intimate partner abuse. Yes, many people who were already abusive enter law enforcement because the profession protects abusers, but I do think the job can, over time, make people much more abusive than they were when they started, both through training and through peer-pressure. Counseling and therapy are totally stigmatized in law enforcement: if your department finds out you're receiving mental health treatment, you risk missing out on special assignments and promotions for being "unstable". So everyone fighting these demons is left fighting alone.

But, I'm not arguing for sympathy and I'm not asking you to empathize with anyone. Instead, all of this is yet another reason why I am a police abolitionist and why I believe that the profession as it exists today cannot be reformed into something better and must instead be replaced. The hundreds of thousands of cops with these hypervigilant alarmist thought patterns are not going to be receptive to being disarmed and trained not to kill. Hell, when I was a cop, even in my later Nice Cop years, I wouldn't have been receptive to being part of an unarmed community service role. I would have balked at any training that said police should err on the side of not killing during a tense, uncertain, and rapidly evolving situation. I would have told you that it was dangerous to dissuade cops from killing because it means they will hesitate when That Day Comes. Any training or policy that put civilian lives ahead of cop lives would've been killed off by a massive mobilization by angry officers.

Among the 900,000 cops out there, are there caring, compassionate officers who just want their community to be safe? Sure. Would some of them make amazing community care responders and conflict mediators and mental health crisis counselors? Absolutely. But these officers are not driving department policy, they are not driving federal policies, and they are not leading the culture of modern American law enforcement. They exist but they are not

representative of the whole of policing. And when you call 911, there's a low likelihood you're getting Officer Friendly rather than Sergeant Dickrifle.

From the frequent police murders of unarmed civilians to the now frequent refusal of cops to defend schoolchildren, it's painfully obvious that the American officer safety mindset is a clear and present threat to everyone in this country. Anytime you're within 20 feet of a cop, you are in danger from their overactive imagination and their total systemic insulation from consequences. You should never feel safe when the cops arrive (unless you're white and rich).

Anyway, weirdly personal one tonight, what do you think? I'm sure some of you out there with cPTSD can relate to the racing thoughts and hypervigilence. What techniques work for you? Also, how do you like these little low-key vlogs versus my more researched, more complex topics? Let me know.

As always, please slap the ol' Like button- god, feels a little tonally inconsistent to be like "I spent many years fantasizing about me and my loved ones being tortured and killed. Don't forget to like this video!".

Anyway, please also share this video with people that you think might find it interesting.

Thanks so much for your time, stay safe out there, and I hope to see you on the next one. Good niiiight!