

HIJACKED

5 Patterns Running Your Life After a High-Stress Career

DR. TREVOR WILKINS

PhD, LPCC-S, CCTP | Associate Fellow, Albert Ellis Institute

EMDR Certified | Clinical Director, The Wounded Blue

15 Years Law Enforcement | Former EMT

I lost my career, my family, and almost my life to unchecked anger and numbness after 20 years in public safety. These are the exact patterns that owned me — and the science that broke them.

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Where Science Meets the Street

This Isn't Just Stress.

It's Your System Running Old Code.

You don't have to be on the floor to be stuck. Most high-performers are walking around with patterns forged in the fire of the job — patterns that look like discipline, control, or toughness from the outside but are quietly destroying everything that matters.

Your brain learned: stay on, stay hard, never show weakness. That kept you alive on the street. Now it's costing you your marriage, your sleep, your health.

When your nervous system gets locked into threat mode and never receives the stand-down signal, it rewires around the stress. Nader's research on memory reconsolidation shows that traumatic memories don't just fade — they get re-encoded every time they replay, reinforcing the same emotional charge. Your brain isn't broken. It's doing exactly what it was trained to do. The problem is the training never got updated.

This guide breaks down the five most common patterns I see in first responders, military, and high-stress professionals. Not theory. Not motivation. The actual loops running underneath — and what the science says about why they're stuck.

These patterns don't announce themselves. They just run. Quietly. Until something breaks.

The Rage Hijack

"I'm not angry. I'm fine." — said right before the explosion.

You're not too emotional. You're not bad at controlling yourself. You're running a survival program that was installed under stress and never received the uninstall command.

This pattern shows up as:

- Explosive anger over things that never used to bother you
- Sudden outbursts you regret two minutes later
- A constant edge that your family walks on eggshells around
- Over-apologizing for reactions you can't even explain

THE SCIENCE:

Your amygdala is still treating minor triggers like lethal threats. Research on the prefrontal-amygdala circuit shows that chronic stress exposure weakens the prefrontal cortex's ability to regulate emotional responses. The brake pedal wears out. The accelerator stays floored.

THE BELIEF RUNNING UNDERNEATH:

"I must never look weak. I must always be in control. If I lose it, I'm done."

This isn't meditation. This isn't counting to ten. This is identifying the exact irrational demand your brain is running and challenging it with evidence. One question: where is the evidence that losing your temper once makes you done? Thirty seconds of honest disputation does more than a year of deep breathing.

The Shutdown Protocol

"I'm fine. I just don't feel anything anymore."

When your system has been flooded too many times, it flips the breaker. This is the Shutdown Protocol — a cold, efficient survival move that turns emotions off so you don't feel the pain. The problem is it also turns off everything good.

This pattern shows up as:

- Nothing excites you anymore — even wins feel flat
- Going through the motions with your family but not really there
- Living on autopilot, just trying to survive the shift
- Feeling disconnected from the person you used to be

THE SCIENCE:

Porges' polyvagal theory describes this as dorsal vagal shutdown — the nervous system's last resort when fight-or-flight isn't enough. It's the same freeze response that mammals use when the threat is overwhelming. Your body decided that feeling nothing was safer than feeling everything. Van der Kolk's neuroimaging studies show decreased activation in brain regions responsible for self-awareness and emotional processing in chronically traumatized individuals.

THE BELIEF RUNNING UNDERNEATH:

"If I open up, I'll fall apart. If I fall apart, I can't protect anyone."

You've pushed through harder things than a belief. You just didn't know that's what you were fighting. Name it. That's not weakness — that's targeting. The evidence says men who process don't fall apart. They get sharper.

The Empty Tank

"I'm doing everything right... but I feel nothing but tired."

You sleep. You train. You eat clean. The tank is still bone dry. That's not laziness. That's your system running on years of accumulated stress hormones because the belief filter never got updated.

This pattern shows up as:

- Crushing fatigue that no amount of sleep fixes
- Zero interest in things that used to light you up
- Constant overwhelm even when the task list is short
- Feeling permanently behind — even when you're caught up

THE SCIENCE:

McEwen's research on allostatic load explains this precisely. Your body adapted to constant threat by maintaining elevated cortisol. Over years, that chronic HPA axis activation damages the hippocampus, disrupts sleep architecture, and depletes the neurochemical systems responsible for motivation and reward. Czeisler's research at Harvard shows that shift workers — which describes most of your career — experience measurable prefrontal cortex impairment equivalent to legal intoxication.

THE BELIEF RUNNING UNDERNEATH:

"I have to stay hard forever or everything falls apart."

You wouldn't run a vehicle on a blown engine and call it discipline. This isn't about going soft. It's about running the actual system correctly so you stop burning out every six months. The belief that rest equals weakness has zero evidence behind it — and decades of evidence against it.

Always-On Mode

"I'm always on. Even when I don't need to be."

You're not just alert. You're scanning. Bracing. Running threat assessments in the grocery store. This is Always-On Mode — the survival program that kept you alive under fire but is now burning you alive in normal life.

This pattern shows up as:

- Jaw, neck, and shoulders permanently locked
- Needing to control every environment and every outcome
- Jumping at sounds, energy shifts, or random door slams
- Brain won't shut off at night — it's still on patrol

THE SCIENCE:

Violanti's research on police populations shows that chronic hypervigilance produces measurable biological markers — elevated cortisol patterns, cardiovascular damage, and metabolic disruption. Your nervous system never received the mission complete signal. Artwohl's work on perceptual distortions during critical incidents demonstrates how these patterns get installed — and why they persist long after the threat is gone.

THE BELIEF RUNNING UNDERNEATH:

"If I relax for one second, something bad happens."

The best-trained professionals in the world practice deliberate recovery. It's not standing down — it's maintaining peak readiness by not burning the system on false alarms. Where is the evidence that constant vigilance at the grocery store is keeping anyone safe? Challenge the belief. Watch it crumble.

The Ghost Reel

"It was years ago. Why is it still playing?"

A smell, a sound, a certain tone of voice — and you're right back in it. This is the Ghost Reel — when old footage hijacks your brain and plays on repeat whether you want it or not.

This pattern shows up as:

- Sudden flashbacks or vivid scenes you can't pause
- Emotional storms with no obvious current trigger
- Racing thoughts and shame spirals at 3 AM
- Avoiding places, people, or situations that might set it off

THE SCIENCE:

Nader's landmark research showed that memories become temporarily unstable — labile — every time they're recalled. This is called reconsolidation. Your brain is trying to complete a story that never got a proper ending. Van den Hout's working memory research demonstrates that bilateral stimulation during this reconsolidation window reduces the vividness and emotional charge of the memory. That's the mechanism underneath EMDR — not magic, neuroscience.

THE BELIEF RUNNING UNDERNEATH:

"These thoughts prove I'm broken. I should be over this by now."

Your brain isn't broken. It's trying to finish a mission that never got a debrief. Intrusive memories are your nervous system's way of trying — and failing — to complete processing. Labeling yourself as broken for having them is an irrational belief layered on top of a neurological process. Challenge the label. Then address the process.

These Patterns Don't Get to Run Your Life Anymore.

If you recognized yourself in even one of these patterns, that's not a weakness. It's awareness. And awareness is where the work starts.

These loops respond to two things: resolving what the nervous system is still holding, and disputing the irrational beliefs running underneath. That's the integration of EMDR and Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy — the same approach used at Thin Line Counseling.

EMDR addresses the neurological side — the memories and body responses that are still firing as if the threat is live. REBT addresses the cognitive side — the demands, the musts, the catastrophic predictions that keep you locked in patterns that no longer serve you.

Most therapy does one or the other. The reason these patterns persist for high-stress professionals is that both systems are compromised. The nervous system needs resolution. The belief system needs reconstruction. In that order.

You don't need to understand all of this right now. You just need to know that what you're carrying has a name, a mechanism, and a solution. And that there's a clinician who's been where you are and specializes in exactly this.

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Dr. Trevor Wilkins | Thin Line Counseling

800-464-1958 | thinlinecounseling.com | @drtrevorwilkins

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