THE LEADERSHIP EDGE

THE "HAIR TRIGGER EFFECT"

When your nervous system forgets how to stand down

One of the most valuable skills in law enforcement is the ability to go from zero to sixty in an instant. When something goes sideways, hesitation can cost lives.

But what happens when your nervous system gets so good at accelerating that it starts losing the ability to slow down?

In our first CARMA Leadership Edge session, we explored a concept I call elasticity. It's the ability to gear up quickly, come back down efficiently, and move between different states as circumstances demand.

Being able to take a hit isn't the whole story. The question is whether you can still move freely afterward.

This brings us to something I wrote about in Police Chief Magazine, something I call a "Hair-Trigger Nervous System."

A problem with the traditional wellness model

Much of our conventional approach to trauma comes from a model of PTSD built around exposure to a single terrifying event… something that overwhelms your ability to cope, leaving you feeling helpless or horrified. And when it happens, it shatters previously held assumptions that the world is a safe place and other people can usually be trusted.

Has anyone ever met an experienced police officer who thinks the world is safe and other people should be trusted by default?

I haven't.

This isn't an insult. It's a reality of how perception is shaped by real world experiences, often hundreds of them over the course of a typical career.



The conventional "PTSD" Model might be a good fit for people who are experiencing their first earth-shattering trauma, but as far as models go, it's a very poor fit for many in the protector / defender community.

For many, there isn't one defining event. There are hundreds of hits to the nervous system, layered over years of interrupted sleep, vigilance, adrenaline surges, organizational pressure, and repeated exposure to human suffering.

Less focus on "single big traumas" and more focus on allostatic load

Cumulative wear and tear from repeated stress is called "allostatic load." Think about the suspension on a patrol vehicle. It doesn't necessarily fail because of one pothole. Years of absorbing impacts gradually change how it handles the road. Your nervous system can change in much the same way.

When your nervous system develops a hair trigger response

"Trigger finger" is a repetitive stress injury that I often encounter among Marines, other warriors, and law enforcement professionals who spend hundreds of hours at gun ranges. Repeated strain can irritate or thicken the tendon that bends the finger, preventing it from gliding smoothly. As a result, the finger may catch, lock, or require extra effort to straighten.

Something similar can happen with your fight-or-flight system. After years of repeated activation, your nervous system can become increasingly sensitive to perceived threats.

The threshold for triggering an adrenaline response drops and returning to baseline becomes harder.



You might notice yourself getting irritated faster, reacting more intensely to small frustrations, or feeling constantly on alert even when nothing is happening.

Your spouse asks an innocent question, and you respond like you're being challenged during a traffic stop.

This isn't necessarily a personality problem. And it isn't proof that you're losing your edge. As we discussed in our first LEADERSHIP EDGE session, it may be a sign that your nervous system has lost some of its elasticity.

Think about a rubber band that's been stretched thousands of times. At first, it stretches easily and snaps right back into shape. But over time, especially if it's held under tension for long periods, it may start to lose some of that elasticity. It still stretches. It still holds tension. But it doesn't return to its original shape as easily.

Your nervous system can work in a similar way. After years of responding to threats, managing conflict, and staying ready for whatever comes next, you may still be highly capable of responding when something happens. **What changes is your ability to come back down afterward.**

And that's the distinction I want you to understand: **Resilience is about your ability to withstand pressure. Elasticity is about your ability to recover your range once the pressure is off.**

You can be exceptionally resilient and still be losing elasticity.

Research using brain imaging has identified measurable changes in stress-regulation and threat-processing networks associated with chronic stress and trauma. These are biological adaptations, not simply failures of attitude or willpower.

The good news: Elasticity can be rebuilt

A severely locked trigger finger sometimes requires a medical procedure. But less severe cases may improve with physical therapy and other conservative treatments.

> There are options for addressing a hair-trigger nervous system. For example, there are medical treatments used in some Special Operations settings that aim to reduce excessive fight-or-flight activation. But there are also skills you can practice to improve how your nervous system responds to stress.

Think of nervous-system training as physical therapy for your fight-or-flight response. Here are two places to start.

1. Measure your Recovery, Not Just Your Reaction

The next time something gets your adrenaline going, notice how long it takes to settle afterward. Five minutes? Thirty? Are you still carrying the activation home hours later?

Many of my clients are using their existing biometric devices to assess their level of activation in real time by looking at their heart rate and other stress indicators.

Your recovery time is one practical indicator of elasticity. The Springer Measure of Elasticity is a tool I use to help assess elasticity. This measure has been deployed on over 5400 police officers using the MAGNUS | One app. Results showed that *half of over 5,000 officers are chronically dysregulated at a moderate or severe level*.

Along these lines, one interesting finding from our first LEADERSHIP EDGE session was that **every participant who completed the assessment showed some degree of nervous system dysregulation**, ranging from mild to severe. This is not surprising among professionals who carry significant cumulative stress, or *allostatic load*, over the course of their careers. It is also a reminder of why understanding and monitoring our own elasticity matters.

As our partnership develops, there will be additional opportunities to confidentially assess your own level of nervous system regulation and receive immediate personal feedback without sending any identifying data to anyone to better understand how cumulative stress may be affecting you.

The goal is to recognize changes before they start making decisions for you.

2.Give your Family a Color Code

In our first LEADERSHIP EDGE session, I suggested parking somewhere safe "one street over" for ten minutes before going home to practice downshifting. But ten minutes isn't always enough to get your nervous system back to baseline. Sometimes it's just enough to recognize where you are.

Try developing a simple color code with your family so you can communicate what you need without making them guess.

RED

"I'm still pretty wound up. Give me 30 minutes to decompress, and then I'll come find you." The important part? Follow through and reconnect.

YELLOW

"I'm doing okay, but I'm not fully downshifted. Can we keep things low-key tonight?" Maybe you need another ten minutes, or a quieter evening than originally planned.

GREEN

"I'm good. What are we doing tonight?" You're ready to engage, connect, and have some fun.

The goal isn't to make your family responsible for managing your nervous system. It's to take ownership of your state, communicate directly, and avoid making the people you love absorb the impact of a difficult shift.

And here's the real test of elasticity: *Can you recognize when you're in the red, give yourself what you need, and deliberately move toward green?*

Your system will still ramp up quickly when speed matters. Your training will kick in when required. The aim here is to make sure you still have a choice about when to accelerate and when to stand down.

That's not losing your edge. That's preserving command of it.



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