

Hypervigilance: On Duty vs. Off Duty

Helping the nervous system shift out of threat-monitoring when the environment no longer requires it.

Why the switch can be difficult

Repeated training and exposure can strengthen rapid scanning, anticipation, controlled emotion, and readiness. Those skills may be essential on duty and exhausting at home.

Possible off-duty signs

- Choosing seats based mainly on exits and visibility.
- Difficulty relaxing in crowds or public spaces.
- Irritability when family members seem unaware of risk.
- Startling easily or feeling unable to sleep deeply.
- Feeling responsible for preventing every possible problem.

Transition skills

- Use a consistent decompression period after shift: shower, walk, music, exercise, quiet drive, or another intentional routine.
- Orient to the current context: "I am off duty; this environment does not require the same level of scanning."
- Reduce repeated checking behaviors gradually when safe.
- Tell family what helps during decompression rather than expecting them to guess.
- Use grounding to bring attention back to neutral or pleasant cues, not only possible threats.

Try this reflection

Where do you notice duty-mode showing up most strongly at home? What cue could remind your nervous system that the context has changed?

Using this resource: For education and skill-building only; not diagnosis, medical advice, or crisis care. If you feel overwhelmed, pause and seek appropriate professional support. In the U.S., call or text 988 for crisis support; call 911 for an immediate emergency.