



# Death Work: Police, Trauma, and the Psychology of Survival

*Vincent E. Henry, Robert Jay Lifton*

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## **Death Work: Police, Trauma, and the Psychology of Survival** Vincent E. Henry, Robert Jay Lifton

In this fascinating new book, Vincent Henry (a 21-year veteran of the NYPD who recently retired to become a university professor) explores the psychological transformations and adaptations that result from police officers encounters with death. Police can encounter death frequently in the course of their duties, and these encounters may range from casual contacts with the deaths of others to the most profound and personally consequential confrontations with their own mortality. Using the survivor psychology model as its theoretical base, this insightful and provocative research ventures into a previously unexplored area of police psychology to illuminate and explore the new modes of adaptation, thought, and feeling that result from various types of death encounters in police work. The psychology of survival asserts that the psychological world of the survivor--one who has come in close physical or psychic contact with death but nevertheless managed to live--is characterized by five themes: psychic numbing, death guilt, the death imprint, suspicion of counterfeit nurturance, and the struggle to make meaning. These themes become manifest in the survivors behavior, permeating his or her lifestyle and worldview. Drawing on extensive interviews with police officers in five nominal categories--rookie officers, patrol sergeants, crime scene technicians, homicide detectives, and officers who survived a mortal combat situation in which an assailant or another officer died--Henry identifies the impact such death encounters have upon the individual, the police organization, and the occupational culture of policing. He has produced a comprehensive and highly textured interpretation of police psychology and police behavior, bolstered by the unique insights that come from his personal experience as an officer, his intimate familiarity with the subtleties and nuances of the police cultures value and belief systems, and his meticulous research and rigorous method. *Death Work* provides a unique prism through which to view the individual, organizational, and social dynamics of contemporary urban policing. With a foreword by Robert Jay Lifton and a chapter devoted to the local police response to the World Trade Center attacks, *Death Work* will be of interest to psychologists and criminal justice experts, as well as police officers eager to gain insight into their unique relationship to death.

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