



## Mindfulness: Be Present in the Moment

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Nick B.: Hello. Welcome and thank you for joining us today for this SAFLEO Sessions podcast. I'm Nick Breul, the senior project manager with the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund in Washington, DC. We are partners in the SAFLEO Program working with the Bureau of Justice Assistance and the Institute for Intergovernmental Research to improve the health, well-being, and resilience of our nation's law enforcement officers. I'm pleased to be joined here today by Sergeant Jason Newton with the Colorado Springs, Colorado, Police Department for a discussion about the core components and benefits of mindfulness and how to use different techniques to improve self-awareness and focus. Sergeant Newton, thank you very much for joining us today.

Jason N.: Thank you, Nick. I appreciate you having me, and I look forward to this conversation.

Nick B.: Yeah, no, it's great. And if you would, just tell us a little bit about your law enforcement experience and how you came into this notion of mindfulness.

Jason N.: Yeah, thank you. And so, I've been a police officer for just over 19 years. I began my career in 2004 with the Sherwood, Oregon, Police Department. I really loved my time with the Sherwood Police Department, and I built solid foundations there and really found a love for community policing and community involvement. In 2008, I did make the transition from Sherwood to beautiful Colorado Springs, and that was for some family reasons. In

2008, I joined the Colorado Springs Police Department, and I've been here for the last 15 years.

Over my 19 years, I've held assignments in patrol on downtown bar detail, as a school resource officer, and community relations. Throughout my time here at CSPD, I actually continued my focus and my work on community engagement and community involvement. I started seeing how that impacted my overall wellness and how it impacted officers' wellness around me—really how being involved in the community helped me become resilient and improve my officer wellness. And then during my time as a school resource officer, actually, I was provided the unique opportunity to attend the Northwestern University School of Police Staff and Command. I was very blessed because I was an officer at that time. But at Northwestern, I really started focusing my research on officer wellness, more specifically around mindfulness in law enforcement. And that's how I came to develop The Mindful Officer class in 2015. And so, throughout my career since 2015, I've been teaching that class here at CSPD. We're really looking at finding unique ways to help our fellow officers and myself.

Nick B.: And it was some of that training and the things that you were doing with the Colorado Springs Police Department in mindfulness that got you to submit to the Destination Zero Program, which is a program that we run at the National Law Enforcement Officer's Memorial Fund, which—just so the audience understands, it's really become a clearinghouse for great ideas for law enforcement to use as a sort of library, if you will, to find out what other agencies are doing for everything from wellness to building resiliency, but also to tactics, to traffic safety, to fitness, all the things that we think fall under the umbrella of officer safety and wellness.

Mindfulness is, and correct me if I'm wrong, Sergeant Newton, it's a component and it's a part of perhaps a larger picture to health, well-being, and resiliency. Would that be correct to say?

Jason N.: Yeah, it'd be wrong to say that it stands by itself, right? It has to be a holistic approach. It's just a piece of the puzzle. Mindfulness may not work for some people or yoga may not work, counseling may not work so we really have to understand it's a huge broad picture of wellness and providing our officers the tools, right? Let's pick a little piece from here and there and put a really good holistic puzzle together for our officers.

Nick B.: Yeah, that's great. That's well said. So, following up on that, can you just take us through a little bit of what mindfulness is?

Jason N.: Mindfulness is—it's pretty simple in the definition. Mindfulness involves paying attention to each event, being present in the moment within your

body and mind with a nonjudgmental, nonreactive, and accepting attitude. It makes you more attuned to what's going on. It makes you even more aware of the dangers.

Nick B.: So, you have a program. Can you tell us about that and what its core components are?

Jason N.: Yeah, The Mindful Officer was developed when we were going through that class at Northwestern University. I started doing some research internally with our department and seeing, were people facing stress and were they doing anything about it? And almost overwhelmingly, the majority of our officers were facing stress. A lot of it wasn't the stress on the street. We train for that. We're ready for that. It's internal stress, the admin or the social media, right? It's been really hard. So, what we do in the class is we really take people through what that stress is doing to us. I don't have any fancy titles behind my name. I tell people that all the time. I talk about the shootings I've been in. I've talked about the critical incidents. I've talked about losing one of my own children. I talk about that, and it really helps people connect. So, it does make me be pretty vulnerable. It's been hard over the years, but I'm getting a little bit more used to it.

Nick B.: So, you share some pretty personal things?

Jason N.: I do share some personal things. And that's what we go through. And then I share, how did I get myself out of these holes? And that's where mindfulness really comes in and evolved. We actually guide people through some very simple mindfulness activities, being present, monotasking, just some breathing techniques. All of us call it tactical breathing, but that breathing can actually reset yourself and be ready for that next call for service. It can get you out of that dark place. But yeah, the class is really authentic. It will teach you how to manage that stress and then also how to be in the moment.

My wife just recently said something to me, and I'm going to be honest here, I've had a pretty stressful time with everything going on. She said, "You're present. You're here with us, but you're actually not here with us." And I was taken back. My wife's a very honest woman. Her and I have been together for 20 years, so I owe a lot to her for getting me through the things. But I'm so glad she called me out on that because I was there with my family, but my mind was at work. My mind was wondering about the next thing.

And so, I had to come back to my tools, come back to my anchors—the breathing, put my phone down, and be present with my family. The last month, I really focused on that again. And man, it's amazing what it does

for you. I feel much more energized. I'm ready to work, but I'm also ready for my family, which is so much more important.

Nick B.: Well, good for her and good for you. I'm a retired policeman. I've been retired for ten years. But the stress that you mentioned, particularly watching the news, particularly with events that have occurred that negatively portray law enforcement that we've seen over the last several years still bother me. My wife, similar to yours, has sort of caught me really getting very upset and agitated by what I'm seeing on the news, and of course, how it affects me as even though I'm retired—I can't stand seeing my profession struggle with some of these things. And of course, I'm also angry about it. It certainly sounds like something that I may need to start thinking about. My wife even asked me the other day if I should start talking to someone.

How is it—as you mentioned, some of these things, and you mentioned that it's not necessarily for everybody. How do you get buy-in? One of the ones that we definitely address in SAFLEO training is that you've got to talk about it. How do you get officers to buy-in to this program that you described?

Jason N.: Yeah, that's a really good question. It's interesting. When I first started this class and I first proposed it to our training academy back in 2015, I remember the first kind of denial, like, "No, we're not doing this." I'm not blaming any department, right? Because the unknown is scary at times. So, when I first proposed it, I heard everything from "Mindfulness is a religion. We don't have time to train in this. This is not an important training. It's too expensive. It doesn't fit. This should not be part of law enforcement." And I was taken aback by it.

Nick B.: Right.

Jason N.: That's kind of a common thing for law enforcement, is that we have that, "We don't need that. We're fine without it. We've been doing fine all these years."

So, one of the things I found—and it's funny, the religious practice caught me off guard. I didn't expect that. Mindfulness, it doesn't belong to Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, none of that. But there are aspects in that, right? Faith can help people. Faith can help people get through hard times just like mindfulness. So, what we ended up doing is really being authentic. I tell anybody, any agency out there that I'm working with, "If you are not authentic in your approach, no one's going to buy into your trainings." You can have and pay for the best training, the best doctor to

come and train your class at mindfulness or whatever, but if you don't actually, truly believe it, no one's going to buy into it.

Nick B.: Right.

Jason N.: And that's why when I teach, it's not a class I could just go and say, "Here's a PowerPoint. Go do it." You have to have personal stories. You have to be authentic. I realize it was hard for me to share. It's hard for me right now when I think about it, sharing my personal loss or seeing a four-month old die in my arms. But when I share that and the struggles, so many more cops are like, "You know what? I felt that way." I thought I was doing really good because I can't break down in a call for service. No one's going to trust the cop if he comes out or she comes out and breaks down. But after the fact, we're going to feel something, and you're like, "What was that I felt?" And you kind of pushed it aside. But when I tell those stories, I kept pushing that aside, and it was tearing me down, and I wasn't present. And then cops started seeing that. So, that's how we really got the buy-in, just being authentic.

My first class I taught in 2016 was an elective here at CSPD. I taught two sessions in one day, and both of them filled up instantly, and I was shocked. Even the police department was shocked that they filled up so quickly, with about a hundred officers taking that class the first day. Several of the officers joined my class, and they said, "The reason I took your class was to see what this was all about and to prove you wrong." And then after the fact, they're like, "I really learned a lot from that." A 20-year veteran, he told me this, and I wrote this quote down, he said, "Without a doubt, I can't thank you enough for your class. It has changed my life and work life for the better."

Nick B.: Wow. That's quite a testament.

Jason N.: It is. It was such an emotional thing. Two hours later into a class, he felt that way. He took the class, only literally, he said he wanted to make fun of me. But that just showed you the value. It's great because I've actually relied on several officers like that over the years to be the advocates. Now they're out there saying, "You know what? I didn't believe in this stuff at first, but this is what's helped me."

Some of the officers that have been on 20 to 30 years have been my best advocates for the class because they actually have been practicing mindfulness, they just didn't know it. When they went home from work, one of my officers, 25 years on patrol—that's a hard job. He turned off his cell phone, put it down, never touched it the whole time off. He didn't realize what he was doing, but he was actually being present. He was

practicing. But he was like, "You're right. I actually was doing that. I just didn't know I was doing that." And that's what kept him healthy all these years, which kept him active.

Nick B.: It certainly sounds like it does. In SAFLEO, mindfulness is one of the elements that we cover in the line officer training to help officers learn to deal with and recognize the signs when they're having difficulty coping and also to recognize those signs in other officers who might be having difficulty in coping. It is one component of an overall wellness program.

Jason N.: We know officer wellness is important. When I first started in 2003, a Sherwood officer took his own life in the holding cells there. I honestly didn't fully understand at the time when I was 23 years old starting this career. I was very naive to the world of policing. I really had no clue why. But something from that has always stuck with me. I wanted to know and understand a bit more about the why. I've seen death and suicide all around me.

If you think about it, law enforcement suicides is an endemic which, if you know anything about endemic, is it's regularly occurring within an area or community. Clearly, this is regularly occurring. And what are we doing about it? So, that's where this is so important. We have to find ways to help our officers. If you just think saying, "We're a culture of wellness," and putting in maybe some therapy checks or one program is going to change your culture and help officers, you're naive.

Nick B.: Right. Right.

Jason N.: We have to be able to be open and honest that this is an endemic. We are losing officers almost every single day to suicide. Clearly, we need to do something more. It is uncomfortable to talk about. I've asked officers, "Do you feel like killing yourself?" Do you think that's an easy question to ask an officer? No, it's not, but it's the question we need to ask if we truly care about them. So that's what we're doing at in CSPD. We're really trying to change that culture. We're opening up about it. We're having our supervisors talk about it. One of the things we started doing is in lineups, just talking about it, just talking about counseling, talking about, "Hey, that call was really tough." A lot of times, we give counseling and services to officers who've been through a critical incident, like, let's say a shooting, but we don't realize maybe a child abuse, a death—sometime, as supervisors, we go out to every death case. So, when I first got promoted, I went to five death scenes in one day. As a supervisor, I realize, I'm like, "This is taking a toll on me," and I'm like, "What's it doing to my officers?" So, in lineup, I started talking about that. I started talking about how I sought counseling, how I'm working on mindfulness or how I'm going out

and running. The more I talked about it, within a 12-month period, 12 of my officers came up to me and said, "Hey, I would like to talk about it." Or, "You have some tools for me?" Or, "I have a friend of a friend that would like to see a counselor. Can you provide that to me?"

But just openly talking about it, especially as a supervisor, knowing that my career has not been harmed, it's actually been helped, I used this in my promotional exam when I got promoted to sergeant, and I'll use it for lieutenant, is that I truly believe in taking care of my mind. I truly believe in counseling, and I truly believe that I had moments where I struggled, and I'm open about that. It's amazing what we do when we just open up. It's very hard, but as leaders, I encourage you to open up about it because you'll see the change in your officers. They start to feel comfortable, and that stigma needs to be broken down. And that's how we break it down, is from top down.

Nick B.: Yeah, I couldn't agree with that more. That's one of the things we emphasize in not only the training, but also in Destination Zero. I think that's very, very well said. You hit the nail on the head, I think, with that. Yeah, I certainly commend you for having that ability to talk about these personal things, that personal fortitude to do that.

One of the things that you mentioned was asking people if they felt like they were wanted to harm themselves or had thought about it. And that's one of the things that we do, do in the training that we offer. The first time I was in one of the trainings, I can't remember where, but the percentage of officers who they're able to respond by using their phones with an interactive PowerPoint so it just simply gives the percentage as people press 1 or 2 on their phone, it was over 20 percent of the class said they had thought about, at one point or another, harming themselves. I thought that not only was a staggering number, but a staggering admission. And this is early on in the class. Once people saw that, a lot of people in the class, I think, relaxed and opened up and there were some very frank discussions about things.

Jason N.: Yeah. That's where we have to get to. One of the things about that, that is mindfulness. Acknowledging the struggles, right? Acknowledging that our job is tough. It's very rewarding as well. One of the things we really focus on is that mindset. If you go to work every day thinking about what this job is taken from you, you'll live like that. But if you go to job acknowledging that it's tough, but what does it do for you, how many lives have you saved? How many lives have you changed? It really can help you build up that resiliency. The great thing is when those cops admit to that, that it is tough and that they thought about taking their own life, they'll become more resilient the next time.

I don't know if you ever threw your back out before or you were sick, and it felt like you weren't going to get past that moment. That's what these tough moments are in life, right? We get in those moments, and it feels like we can't get past it because human nature is not really good at living in the moment, understanding. We're looking at the future, and we're like, "I'm never going to get past this. I'm never going to get past this," and we're stuck in this kind of loop, which is how depression, why suicides happen is because people can't see past that.

Nick B.: This is not a one-off either. This is a consistent practice, correct? This is something you engage in and have to consciously engage in.

Jason N.: Yeah, it's just like any training. It's—you can't just do it once and think it's going to cure everything. I think that's where people feel like, "Well, I tried meditating. I tried taking a deep breath. It didn't work for me." Well, it's because you have to keep trying. You have to keep practicing. You got to make it a practice. Just like I said, my wife told me the other day that I wasn't present, and she was right. I teach this for a living. I have to continue to be present. We also have to have those people in our lives that are willing to call us out when we aren't practicing it, and so, have kind of that support system.

Nick B.: It's particularly difficult today given social media and the constant barrage. I remember I went through a particular time that was bad on the police department. Some advice I got from the chief was, "Don't watch the TV. Don't pick up the newspaper. I'm giving you two weeks off. Just go and be yourself." He's had great advice, saying sort of, "This too shall pass." It's particularly difficult in today's world with the 24-hour news cycle. And now everyone walks around with mini TV stations in their hands.

Jason N.: You're right on the money with that. It is extremely difficult nowadays. When I started law enforcement 19 years ago, and I know your career spans even further than that, I didn't have to worry about the social media every day. I'd see the news, but it was just, I'd look at the weather and turn it off. But now, I feel like I'm connected. It does something to our brains. It does tear us apart.

When I took over community relations in 2019 for our department, we were kind of on a high. Community is doing really good. I was encouraged. Then the pandemic hit. And then we were still working through it, but it was weird because people are like, "Wow, your guys are heroes." I'm like, "I'm just going to work every day doing what we're normally do. That's what we do as cops. We're task oriented. We go to work. We do our job." In 2020, it felt like somebody flipped the switch.



One day, we were heroes. And the next day, we were villains. It tore everybody apart.

Nick B.: Me too. Oh, me too. Yeah.

Jason N.: And I could tell you my wife, Andrea, 20 years together—it took a toll on her too. I didn't realize the toll it was taking on my family at the time. And then that even continued to bring me down because I felt like the world was on my shoulders. Every call I took, every stop I made—like you said, Nick, we care about this profession. We care about doing the right thing. It makes it even harder when you care, and most of our cops care. And that's what makes it harder.

So, it is a challenge, which is why you have to find that balance. I'm not saying you've got to disconnect, go up to the mountains, and meditate for four hours and not have phones, not have technology. That's not realistic. But also have some checks and balances. My son is my check. When we sit down to dinner, he goes, "Dad, do you need your phone?" I'm like, "Well, I'm on call, son." He's like, "You can hear your phone from across the room." Six-year-old logic, very, very wise. And you're like, "You know what? Son, you're right. I need to separate this," because he wants me present. He wants me there. That really helps me, those checks and balances, and that's what we have to do. When you're out in the community, we talked about—Place U.S. is a program we have here for our cops. What it does is it puts sports balls in every single patrol vehicle. Cops can take that sports ball out, and they can play catch with the kid. And then their kid gets to keep that ball. But what does that do? It resets us. It helps us focus. It makes us a better person. It also lets us see that kid as a kid again, and it sees the joy in the world. It's amazing. We've handed out 4,000 sports balls in two years here at Colorado Springs. Clearly, the cops need a mental reset, and that's what's helping. It's connecting us to the community, too.

So, those are things I really encourage you to do. You're going to go down that rabbit hole, I guarantee. Sooner or later, you're going to go on social media. But understand that is a very different world than what's actually out in your own community who actually supports you, who's actually there. So, just make sure you have that balance.

Nick B.: Well, and I was going to mention when you talked about 2020 and everything that happened, when I was working for the Metropolitan Police in DC, we went through some pretty tough times in the early '90s with our reputation. That made it hard to put the uniform on and go to work every day because you really felt like everyone was looking at you in a negative way.

I don't know if you sort of had the same thing, but I felt an overwhelming need to prove to every contact that we were good people and that I'm not here to hurt you. I was going out of my way because of what I felt was the overwhelming perception against my agency to try and prove those people who may not have been had any animosity towards me or may not have even really thought about it. But that also put more stress on me because I was probably working too hard to do that.

Jason N.: No, Nick. And I think people listening to us, they'll probably feel it. That's what we talk about, being authentic and sharing those stories. Because guess what? I felt the same way. I wanted to prove every single call. I wanted to prove every single person. Just like you, Nick, I was trying to do too much. That impacts our wellness. And so, that's why we encourage our officers, "You know what? You can't change everything, but what you can do is make an impact when you're there." So, take a minute and just have a positive contact. Play football. It might not change the world, but it might change that one perspective in that time.

Nick B.: Right. Yeah. You got to take them one at a time. Sure.

Jason N.: And that's really what it's all about, is just being present in the moment. That's all mindfulness. So, it all comes back full circle—being present in the moment, taking things one at a time. You'll start seeing the value in their job, and the community will see you're authentic and you care, and they will back you up, and they will support you.

Nick B.: Wow. That's excellent. This has been a really great conversation, Jason. Thank you for joining me today in this important discussion about mindfulness and the benefits of using the core components to develop healthy habits as part of an overall wellness program.

For more information on this topic and other officer safety and wellness issues, I encourage our listeners to visit [www.safleo.org](http://www.safleo.org). And remember, a healthy officer is a better and safer officer. Until next time, be safe and stay well.

Speaker 1: The SAFLEO Program is dedicated to providing training, technical assistance, and resources to law enforcement agencies, staff, and families to raise awareness, smash the stigma, and reduce and prevent law enforcement suicide. For additional information regarding the SAFLEO Program, please visit [safleo.org](http://safleo.org). That's S-A-F-L-E-O.org. Follow us on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, the Bureau of Justice Assistance, BJA, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, is committed to making our nation's communities safer through resources, developing

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