Are You in Debt With Sleep?

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Corey T.: Hello, everyone. I'm Chief Corey Tchida with the National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers, or SAFLEO Program, and host for this SAFLEO Sessions Podcast. I am the police chief with the Georgetown, Texas, Police Department, and we're really excited to be with you today. Today, I am joined by our guest, Chief Steve Petrilli with the Normal, Illinois, Police Department. Steve, thank you very much for joining us today.

Steve P.: Thanks a lot, Corey. I'm really excited to be here.

Corey T.: Steve, I know you're passionate about connecting between mental wellness and physical wellness. Can you tell us about your interest in this area?

Steve P.: Absolutely. I've been a law enforcement officer now for 23 years. Currently, I'm the chief of police at my agency. I've been doing that for a month, but the side interest and passion that I have outside of law enforcement truly is health, wellness, and fitness. So, I've been incorporating my passions with some

of my talents in the profession and really trying to bring good information to our cops.

Corey T.: Yeah, absolutely. And I share a similar passion. I have been the interim chief of this department since June of last year. And I've been the assistant chief since 2012 and over the time, one of the things I constantly tell the officers, the three things I'm concerned about is their mental wellness; their physical wellness; and—whatever that looks like for them—their spiritual wellness.

But today, we're going to be focusing on an area in the domain that really affects, honestly, affects all three of them, and we're really going to be talking about the importance of sleep. And what I think is interesting is sleeping is a bodily function, so you think it is something that, really fundamentally, we just do. But we have significant issues with fatigue and sleep in this profession, right?

Steve P.: Absolutely. And I'm excited to go back to what you had said there that you're the interim chief. You're a leader of that agency. And I've got to tell you, that's refreshing because as you know, the priorities of an agency start at the top, and when you have a chief or anyone in leadership that's prioritizing anything—fitness, wellness, whatever—that looks like, that's exciting to hear.

Corey T.: Yeah. And what's interesting about this is when we talk about physical fitness, there's lots of ways for us as leaders in an organization to assist our officers with what we provide to them in terms of resources with facilities and time to conduct physical fitness activities. And even in the domain of nutrition, there're ways for us to make an impact. But sleep is one of those, that's for me, as a chief, is a little more difficult. How do we, I guess—first we really need to start with fundamentally is, is what happens when we don't get enough sleep? And then, how do we help the people that we're entrusted to care for and lead? How do we help them get sleep?

Steve P.: I think, as a chief or a leader in an organization, it's incumbent on us to define: what are going to be the focus points for the agency? What are going to be those things that we value? And when you start talking about overall wellness, sleep, we've got to have that conversation. Because I think that you know, Corey, that when you look at the way in which this career field is laid out, we tend to—everybody has their go around of working

shift work, the overtime shifts. And then, you start to couple that with high levels of stress—sometimes, as the career goes on, the nutrition falls off. We stop moving as much as far as exercise. So, when you look at sleep and the role that that plays in overall health and wellness, it's very impactful. So, I think as that leader, we really have to spend the time prioritizing that and making sure that our folks understand why sleep is so important, and all the causatory factors with this job that can really throw it off.

Corey T.: Yeah, absolutely. You hit the nail on the head. It's not just the normal hours, the work hours—police officers and people in law enforcement have traditionally worked a lot above and beyond that. And especially right now, when the challenging times we're in with recruiting and retention, most of us have less officers doing not the same amount of work, quite frankly, but more work. So, this whole concept of sleep and fatigue is becoming even more prevalent because a lesser amount of people are working significantly more hours, and how we impact that is really critical, I think. But I think what we need to start with, with fundamentally just understanding: what happens to us when we don't get enough sleep? Everybody knows we need to sleep, but what are the implications when that doesn't happen?

Steve P.: The lack of sleep is tied to so many different things. And some of the best ways that I've heard it correlate is that you can actually correlate a lack of sleep to impairment that you could suffer from, from consuming too much alcohol. There's literally studies out there that show when you go so long without sleep, that's equivalent to having a blood alcohol level of .05, .08, things like that, based on the amount of time that you've been sleep deprived.

Another interesting thing with sleep is how it really does control our hormone regulation and optimization in the body. So, when we look at health, wellness, and fitness from that holistic perspective and where sleep fits in, sleep really does run the show with our hormone regulation. Sleep is also very, very important when we talk about our ability to function at a high level, as a police officer, to be alert, to be able to manage stress. Some of these things that are very important for us when we're under slept, there's definitely a negative impact that we're going to see manifest itself from that.

Corey T.: Yeah, absolutely. One of the things I've heard over the years is when we talk about when we are awake, and there was an analogy they used—they talk about, "Pretend you're wearing a backpack. It's like a sleep backpack. And for every hour that we're awake, it's like putting a brick in that backpack. But when we sleep, we are able to remove two bricks from that backpack, for every hour that we're asleep."

But I think one of the things that's out there, and I've heard this a lot, is when we talk about a sleep debt, everybody fundamentally understands that we should ultimately be trying to get eight hours a night, but I know a lot of people, and sometimes myself included, in the past before I had a better understanding of all the concepts behind sleep and fatigue—it's like, "Okay, I can do a lot of work over these three days. And then I can just catch up on my sleep on the fourth day or maybe the fifth day. And I can pay off that—for lack of a better term—I can pay off that sleep debt." Steve, what do you think about that? Is that even realistic?

Steve P.: Well, I love that imagery there, that analogy of the bricks and how time awake and how that relates to the sleep debt process. But I think when we're looking at optimizing sleep, I think that seven to nine hours for an adult is really where all the studies have shown that's going to be the optimal area to be in. As far as being sleep deprived through the week and then trying to catch up on the weekends, I think that strategy really does set people up to fail a little bit.

But if that's the only time that you can get the sleep, by all means, take it. But I think we really have to look at it from a more quantified approach that, "Hey, you know what? That seven to nine hours a day, we really need to prioritize that, and we need to make sure that we're striving to get that." I think that's probably going to be the best approach for most folks.

Corey T.: Yeah, absolutely. And I know in the SAFLEO Program, and there's been some studies that have been done on that sleep deficit, and they have some really good data that shows that we really can't, like you discussed, we can't really pay off that deficit of sleep. And we actually don't even really come close to paying it off. We still see that fatigue, how fatigue affects our performance. If we can spend a minute talking about not just the physical effects of fatigue and lack of sleep, but I think as importantly, is how does it affect us cognitively as well?

Steve P.: Oh, I think when we're under slept, it's very easy to feel that cognitive decline or what a lot of people would term a brain fog, I think, is probably the best way that I've heard it described. And just being under slept one night can really contribute to that. There's also, when we were talking about the hormone regulation that happens with proper sleep, when we're under slept—I'd really like to educate cops on insulin resistance, and we spend a lot of time talking about that. Just one night being under slept can really affect your insulin resistance or your lack of being insulin sensitive. There's some major, major, major things with sleep that can really, just being one night under slept, can already start the body going down a road of having issues.

Corey Steve, you talked about the effects of insulin change when we are sleep deprived or fatigued. Can you tell us a little more about what exactly does that change in the insulin in our bodies, do for us physically and mentally?

Steve P.: Yeah. Insulin is essentially the hormone in the body that's charged with taking the energy that we eat, our food. Because everything that we eat, the body turns into energy, and insulin's job is—it's a hormone in the body that is charged with taking glucose, which is what our body turns the majority of the foods that we eat into, and it delivers it to the cells so that we have energy to do anything. And that's from a daily activity like walking or me sitting here doing a podcast, all the way up to the workouts and things that we do throughout the day.

Now, what happens when we become under slept is that we start to dysregulate that hormone insulin—that insulin has a harder time doing its job. And when you hear the term insulin resistance and insulin sensitivity, we want our bodies to be sensitive to insulin. When our pancreas releases insulin in response to food that we eat, we really want our body to be sensitive to that, to where that insulin is very easily moving the glucose into our cells, allowing our body to use that as energy.

When we're under slept, insulin has a harder time. We become more insulin resistant to where the body is really struggling to take that energy, that food, to convert it to glucose and move it into the muscle cells so that we can use it for energy. And that starts to spur a whole host of problems, because you don't want insulin in the body sitting around going, "Hey, the muscle cells won't let me in. I don't know what to do with this energy or this glucose."

Because that's when we start to have some dysregulation in the body, and the majority of that insulin or that blood glucose at that point would be stored as adipose tissue or fat.

And then that starts an inflammatory cascade. There's a whole host of issues that happen when insulin gets dysregulated. But sleep is the number one way—when we are properly slept, that gears our body, that gears our hormones, specifically that insulin hormone, to do its job in the body the right way.

Corey T.: Yeah. Steve, sounds like just another dimension, if you will, in the physical effects. We oftentimes, very similar, we talk about stress and the consonant introduction of cortisol and epinephrine into our body and the long-term deleterious effects of those chemicals staying in our body longer than they should and building up. Thank you for sharing that.

And I know when I was a young police officer—when you're a young police officer, you feel like you're invincible. And you feel that you can just move past and push through some of the things we're talking about. Knowing some of the issues that can come with sleep across that broad domain and how it affects you mentally and how it affects you physically—when I spoke earlier about this having a difficult time for us to impact, help officers sleep in a meaningful way, I don't know that it necessarily works to just tell people, "Hey, you need to get sleep." Again, I think the starting point is everybody, fundamentally, to some degree, understands that. How do we help them? What can we do organizationally and individually to move the needle on something that we already know is a problem? How do we move the needle? How do we help them get the sleep that their body and minds require?

Steve P.: Yeah, I think as leaders, we just have to identify it as an issue. That we recognize the issue, and we're going to prioritize taking some steps to try to start correcting the issue. I really like Dr. Kirk Parsley, a Navy Seal doc, and I've really followed a lot of his material, and he talks about relating sleep deficits to that profession, being Seals, right? How they go through training, they're in a culture that doesn't necessarily value sleep. Their leaders don't necessarily value sleep. So, it's set up in a way in which—that's a tough profession to walk into and say, "Hey, we need to start sleeping."

So, his approach with Navy Seals, and this is a perfect carryover to law enforcement, because there's a lot of similar traits there. You start educating these folks because these are very smart people. We have a lot of smart people out there doing these jobs, and when we sit down and not only prioritize sleep, we explain the why. And I think, we give our folks that education that, "Look, when you're not sleeping, your hormones are not doing what they should be doing. You have hormone dysregulation, your lymphatic system in your body is not being allowed to purge all the work that you're doing in the weight room. The muscles aren't made in the weight room, they're made in the bedroom, because you have to give your body time to recover."

I think bringing some of those points to the forefront, explaining to our people, not just, "Hey, you need to prioritize sleep," but the why, I think that's really the impactful part, because our folks are smart folks. They want to be healthy. It's just giving them those resources and the why and letting them essentially make those corrections if they need to and get on a better path.

Corey T.: Yeah. I absolutely agree that the why part is critical. I grew up in 27 years of doing this job, when I've started a lot of the things I was told, there really wasn't a lot of why. It was the classic, "Because I told you so." I think the why is really important, especially when one of the first things that we tend to do in our profession is we tend to—one of the first measures we take is oftentimes something that employees tend to view as punitive, where we limit the number of hours outside of the regular duty hours that they can work. And even though I do agree that is necessary because sometimes, we have to protect one another from ourselves and see that bigger picture, the why is really important.

I know one thing that I have implemented in my agency, which, when I think about our culture, not the culture of my agency, but the culture of our profession, is the whole concept of sleeping on duty. There never was a time in my past where—everybody probably in the world has policies against sleeping on duty, and I understand what that's about. But I think we're starting to see a shift in the culture of the profession where there's some recognition of the fatigue, and we are adding elements of control to that.

One of the things I have implemented is a restorative rest policy, which gives officers the opportunity—there's a lot of data out there on the power of, for lack of a better term, power napping. What can you tell me? What do you know about power napping and the value of that?

Steve P.: Well, I do know that taking strategic naps throughout the day will definitely enhance your learning and get you some of the restorative sleep that you need. I just know that with our career, it's great to hear that you're taking an innovative approach with that. Because I think that's what we need, is innovative ideas. And you hit it right on the head, we have a policy against sleeping on duty. So, looking at those through the lens of, "Hey, just because this is the way we've always done, it doesn't mean it's the right way to do it." And looking at how we can maybe make some innovative changes within the course of our day to really prioritize that sleep, I think, is an excellent approach.

We currently, at our agency, don't have anything like that. But it was—that really does spur some ideas in my head that maybe we could do a little better, because you think of those officers that are working a night shift, and then they have court the next day. That's one of those ones that tends to get everybody. And being able to build a little bit of time in there that they could grab a nap, whether that's at the courthouse or at the police department—little changes like that we could tweak and really make some improvements. I think that's a great idea.

Corey T.: And we're hopefully speaking to a group that understands the reality, and I've been a proponent of reevaluating how we in our profession look at fatigue and sleep. Before I think there was a huge recognition that it was an issue because for me—I've always known it's an issue. And the whole concept of the restorative rest period or napping or whatever we want to choose to call it, the reality is we all know that it's been happening anyway, right? For me, it's about, it's about giving cultural and organizational and professional recognition to the fact of, A, why is it happening and why sleep is important? But putting some guardrails around it so that what's likely already occurring is occurring in a more controlled, safer manner, right?

Because for me, I don't want an officer out there somewhere trying to do this outside of policy in a location that's not safe for them. That's not safe for the public. I don't want there to be public perception. We've seen videos and pictures of officers

asleep in patrol cars. And we've always, historically, treated that as a discipline issue, which I'm not suggesting—sometimes it can be a discipline issue, but the reality is part of it. We own part of that for failing to recognize why that's occurring in the first place and what our role and responsibility as leaders is to change the narrative.

Steve P.: I agree with you, 100 percent. If there's going to be a change in culture, a change in the profession and how we do things, it's got to take innovative thinking, and it just can't be the continued, doing the same thing we've always done.

Corey T.: Steve, let me ask you this. When we're talking about fatigue, there're things the organization can do, but—but what about me? What if I am having a difficult time sleeping? Sometimes it's not just as simple as crawling into bed and closing your eyes. What can I do to help myself, some techniques to get better sleep?

Steve P.: That's an excellent question, Corey. And there are some really simple things that we can do. And like we said, it sounds like we're oversimplifying this when we say, "Hey, get seven to nine hours of sleep." But there's a few simple steps that we can follow with that. The first one is a dark room. Our skin is porous. Our skin actually is made to detect lights, so when we have a lot of these lights on throughout the night, whether that be a TV or a lot of the appliances and things that we have now have lights to tell us that they're off.

Well, our skin actually absorbs that light. And it's one of these little signals to the body that, "Hey, it's not time to go to sleep yet." Getting all that light out of the room. Blue blocking glasses, that's another thing that has been used to cut down that amount of blue light that's coming in through the eyes and giving the bodies the wrong signal, because at the end of the day, that's exactly what we want it to do.

We want to show our body that it's time to go to sleep. And we do that by ritualizing sleep. So, go into bed at the same time every night, trying to get a nice dark room, a cool temperature, 68 degrees is where all the studies show the optimal temperature to sleep. And there's also another important piece of this is, "Hey, what happens when I'm laying in bed, and I just had a stressful night at work?" Or, "I've got a million different things

going on in my family life, and my brain starts churning?" Because we've all been there.

And you know this being a chief, just like I do—there're some nights that I wake up and right away, work starts churning in the brain. And what happens from a physiological standpoint with that is, if we spend too much time with the brain churning up, and we start thinking about things and these action items that we've got to do, the body starts to wake up. Our adrenals start firing and our body starts thinking, "Well, hey, now it's time to start addressing some of these tasks." And it gets to be this cycle where we wake up, we start thinking about things, and we can't get back to sleep.

It's funny to talk about this because I actually had this happen last night. I was anticipating this podcast. I was excited to do it and thinking, "Hey, what are we going to talk about? And how is this going to flow? And I can't wait to get this information out." Well, I started feeling myself get my adrenals going. I started waking myself up. I'm like, "This is a perfect time to employ a tactic that I want to give to the audience here." And I think what you have to do at that point is, you have to find a way to settle your body back down.

The same way that we would within a tactical environment, the best way—or a post-workout environment. Whenever we've got our heart rate elevated, we've got stress. The best way to bring the body back down to a sense of homeostasis or that parasympathetic nervous system is proper breathing. I highly recommend that people look into box breathing, which is all nasal breathing—four seconds in, a four second hold, a four second exhale, and then you let it reset again. The simple breathing in the box for four seconds or a three-one-six approach to breathing, where it's a three-second inhale, a one-second hold, and a six-second exhale. Some simple things like that, when we start feeling our adrenals kick up, we start feeling our mind going—kick right into a tactical breathing type of mindset, allow your body to relax. And then, hopefully, for people that's an effective tool they can start to utilize that if they feel that happening—they can maybe bring the body back down and actually get to sleep.

Corey T.: I think, hopefully, the takeaway for today is—is just a little better understanding of the issues, and hopefully the willingness and the desire and to start making changes to the culture and start

providing for the people we're entrusted to lead in a meaningful manner. Steve, I want to thank you very much for your time today. We appreciate you sharing this information with the listeners.

Steve P.: I completely appreciate having the opportunity to come on and give a few ideas. Sleep is a robust topic. I think we've just touched the tip of the iceberg on this, but hopefully some of the things that we've said maybe spur some thoughts in leaders' minds or give the actual end user, the officers that we're trying to help, maybe a few tips or information that they can use moving forward.

Corey T.: Yeah, absolutely. You literally stole the analogy I was going to use. It's definitely the tip of the iceberg. There's a lot of work to be done. I think, fundamentally, what it's going to come down to initially is at least just changing the mindset. And when everybody's mindset is modified and understands why this is an important topic, we can move forward. For our listeners, we want to thank you today for joining us for this SAFLEO Sessions Podcast.

We want to give you the opportunity to please visit the SAFLEO website at www.safeleo.org. That's S-A-F-L-E-O.org. You'll find more information on this topic and other resources focused on officer wellness and suicide prevention. A healthy officer is a better and safer officer. Until next time, please stay safe and be 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. That's S-A-F-L-E-O.org. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

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