



Disconnecting From Duty

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- George M.: Hello and thank you for joining us today. I'm George Mussini, and I'm with the Baltimore County Police Department. And I'm also an instructor with the National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers Program, and I'm your host for this edition of the SAFLEO Sessions Podcast. I'm joined today by Dr. Robert Sobo, director of the professional counseling division of the Chicago Police Department, and Dr. Sobo is a wellness subject-matter expert with the SAFLEO Program. And I'm happy to have him here today. How are you doing today, Rob?
- Rob S.: Hey, George, I'm doing well. It's always a pleasure to talk with you.
- George M.: So, Rob, I want to talk to you today about how to bring the job home in a healthy way so that you can enjoy your downtime. Because there are times that I, myself, like many other law enforcement officers around the country, have been guilty of kind of taking the job home and then maybe sometimes taking it out on the family. And I figured you'd be the perfect person to talk to about being able to actually enjoy your downtime by disconnecting. And I was wondering if you could share some tips with us today on ways to disconnect and communicate with the family and really just make the most of our downtime.

Rob S.: Well, I think in order to do that, you have to make sure that you are well to begin with because you bring your well-being wherever you go and you bring your lack of well-being wherever you go. And I hear officers all the time saying, "I don't bring the job home with me," but you do. And whether you talk about it or not, in some way, it gets communicated. So, in order for it to be communicated in a positive way, meaning that you can go home and be present emotionally and physically with your family members and have intimate, close contact and interactions with them, you have to be well. You can't be fighting trauma, stress, depression, or anxiety because the more you try and avoid acknowledging those emotions and where they come from, the more energy it takes to suppress them. And that means you're not really available.

So, law enforcement personnel have a responsibility to their well-being. Because in this job, as you fully know well, George, you have to take care of yourself because this job does have, can have, a negative consequence on your well-being. It's just not possible to experience what you all do on a daily basis and not have it have some sort of impact on you. So, just like you make sure that your equipment is functioning every day in order to be well and be safe on the streets, you have to make sure that your mind is clear and free of trauma, stress, and depression so that it doesn't get in the way and then come home.

George M.: Now, one of the things I'd like to confess is recently at a Fourth of July fireworks display—it was the first time since the pandemic that I was in a large crowd of people with my family. And fortunately, I was off duty, but it was the first time that I had been off duty for a Fourth of July event. And I found myself still in cop mode. And while everybody else was looking up, I'm looking side-to-side, I'm thinking, "What if a car comes through the crowd? What if there's an active shooter?" And I start telling my family where they should stand, where they should go in the event of something. And what I didn't realize was that I was actually triggering an anxiety event for my daughter.

And in retrospect, it was extremely unfair. I was trying to be protective, but I didn't realize that it was also ruining what should have been a good time. So, I'm sure as a doctor, you probably hear stories like this. Please tell me I'm normal. And tell me what, what the other listeners can do to identify, be self-aware, and maybe what we could do to be healthy.

Rob S.: Yeah. You know, first of all—unfortunately, it is an all-too-common experience for law enforcement to have those sort of incidences when they are out socializing with family or loved ones. I think it's an

indicator that maybe you've experienced a prolonged period or an exposure to stress and trauma. And so when you go out in the world as George the husband and the father, you have a hard time separating those roles from that of law enforcement. And so one thing, of course, is to pay attention to that because it's a way of your mind telling you need to really identify and talk through where that comes from with a licensed professional who has an expertise in working with law enforcement.

But when you are in that place and you do catch yourself, it is okay to say to your family members or loved ones. "Hey, look, I'm really sorry. I'm having trouble today letting go of being the police officer, and that's unfair to you. You are safe, we are safe. I would not put you in jeopardy. We're going to have a good time. I'm sorry." And reassure them, because when you don't, like you said, you triggered an anxiety attack in your daughter. She was reacting to your anxiety and maybe traumatic experiences. And that's one of those times where you do bring the job home because you act it out without saying it. And so your family, they may not be able to identify exactly what it is, but they feel it and they react to it.

George M.: Right. You and I have spoken in the past about when the family feels it, that it would be a good idea for you and your family or your loved ones, or even your friends, to kind of have a signal to say, "Hey, you're off duty right now." Whether it be a touch on the arm or a pat on the back or a silent signal between parents so that the kids aren't picking up on what's going on, but something to make you aware that you need to step out of cop mode or at least dial it back, so everybody else can have a good time.

Rob S.: Absolutely. I think that's a really good idea to talk about that before something like that happen so that you know what to expect, and it gives your family members permission to gently touch you or give you a word to let you know that you need to be present and be dad, spouse, and family member.

George M.: Yeah. Because a word is helpful. I'll be honest with you. My wife will give me a certain look, and that's when I know it's time for me to dial back—no matter what it is, where we're talking about. So whether you give that look or you give that touch or you get that signal, make sure that you're receiving it if you have that established with your friends and family.

Another thing I want to talk to you about is, obviously—historically, police officers wouldn't want to talk to a doctor. They wouldn't want to

talk to their department psychologist because they were afraid that there'd be some kind of negative consequence. But we're happy to say that now, nationally, the trend is going, "Hey, if you've got an issue, you've got cumulative stress, it's okay to talk about it." And you can—you don't always have to go to a doctor. You can go to a trusted friend or a friend colleague, battle buddy, counselor if you want to use the EAP. What other types of mechanisms or professional services would you recommend that are perfectly confidential and fine and wouldn't complicate an officer's ability to reach out to maybe vent or even ask for help?

Rob S.: Well, I think there's a lot of things that can be done. Departments can have protocols, general orders, special orders, whatever they may be called in a particular city that give officers guaranteed confidentiality. And of course, state laws give privacy and privilege. And remember, stigma belongs to a culture. And so, in each department, stigma can be broken by changing the rules. In the Chicago Police Department, we teach our officers to communicate where they spend the majority of their waking hours, which is in the districts or on the streets with one another. If they can learn how to communicate in healthy ways with one another about their emotional consequences of being on the job or something that they experienced, then it takes away the stigma. And if they support each other in going for help professionally with a licensed mental health counselor, whether it's somebody that belongs to an EAP, if they have an EAP, or whether it is a vetted professional in the area, then it makes it safe to go.

You know, it takes a while to change a culture, but it can be done. The goal is to make processing of the emotional consequence of being a law enforcement officer courageous, strong, and part of a normal process. You know, law enforcement officers make sure that all of their equipment is in working order every day before they hit the streets because it can save their lives, can save their partner's life, and lives in the community that they serve. So, it just goes to—it makes sense then that the most powerful tool that they have, which is their mind, is also in the best working condition it can be.

Then, once they feel safe doing that, of course they can translate that at home. And bring that home in a healthy, productive way. And then the reciprocal relationship makes for a much healthier law enforcement culture and a much healthier intimate, close, family life.

George M.: Yeah. You bring up so many good points. As law enforcement officers, we're always used to looking out for people that we don't know—strangers. We'll lay our lives on the line. We'll do anything for a

stranger. And then sometimes, we often overlook our own family. And then it's detrimental to the relationship. So, I think it's important for us to remind people that you have to look out for your family, you have to keep it balanced, and you have to have ways to relax and enjoy that off-duty time where your identity as a police officer is not 24/7. Imagine if you took your badge and gun away. Who would you be? Would you still be Rob? Would you still be George? Can you live without the title of sheriff, deputy officer, chief, whoever you may be? Can you just be you on your downtime?

Rob S.: Yes. And it's so important. And I think we always say communication is the key to a good life. And good communication fosters trust, and intimacy, and connectedness in all relationships. And so, you have to practice that. And going back to when we were saying that law enforcement officers—and I respect this and honor the idea behind it, in which they say, "I don't want to bring the job home." It's because they want to protect their loved ones from what they've experienced and how they're feeling. But think about it for a minute. If you don't feel like you can share how you are feeling after an incident at work, what does that say about how you feel about it? It must be pretty painful, pretty scary, pretty horrific that you think somebody else that you love and who is close to you wouldn't be able to handle it, hear it, or be able to help you with it.

And what I often say to law enforcement officers is you don't have to necessarily share the details of an incident, but you can share yourself. You can say, "I had a bad day today. There was something that happened on the job that left me feeling down, anxious, or a little depressed. And that's what you may be seeing in me today." That allows appropriate family members to hear what's going on, to know that you trust them to share it, and for you to get comforted and get support from them. And then it allows them to be able to come to you with what's going on in their lives as well, rather than setting a rule in the family where we don't share our emotional lives with one another.

George M.: Right. So, what I'm hearing you say is that it's okay to share your experience, what emotions you've experienced at the job, the frustration, the sadness, shock, or whatever it is. But also spare them the details of the blood and guts, the part that they didn't sign up for, the parts that they don't need to see.

Rob S.: Right. That way you don't have to feel like in order to not talk about it, you have to withdraw and isolate. And when you withdraw and isolate, it, of course, sends a strong message, which can be misinterpreted, and often is, as, "You're rejecting me. You don't want to be here. You

don't want to be with me and or this family." That's what causes so much family conflict in law enforcement. And it's probably one of the leading causes of the high divorce rate in law enforcement that we experience.

George M.: Man, you just peeled the layers back on that onion. Because that—the truth stinks. It's true that when we don't want to share our emotions, we isolate ourselves. And then, in turn, like you just said—get interpreted that we don't want to be part of the family, when we're actually just trying to protect them. I'm so glad that you brought that up because when we talk about suicide prevention, unstable relationships are unfortunately a leading cause in suicide. And that's what we're trying to reduce here. And one tip that I had shared in our Crisis to Calm series was when—and this took me several years to learn after being a law enforcement officer, was that when I first started the career, I didn't have the ability to text my wife when I was coming home. I don't want to admit how long I've been on the job, but long enough that texting wasn't an option.

But I can at least communicate with my wife before I come home and say, "Listen, I had a rough day. If you see me sitting in the driveway for a few extra minutes or it takes me 10 or 15 minutes extra to get home—I need to unwind in a healthy way. And I just need to leave that stress in the car so we can communicate once I get inside." And that gives her an opportunity to one, be prepared to know that, "Okay, my husband had a rough day, and he's not taking it out on me and the family." And that she'll maybe offer me a little bit more patience if I do happen to be a little bit quieter or if I happen to be a little bit edgier.

Rob S.: Exactly. I mean, that's a really good example. And I know that you practice that at home because we've talked about it. That's a great example of good communication.

George M.: Yeah, it's absolutely key. And so, I was wondering, is there anything that law enforcement agencies or a group of officers can do at the ground level that doesn't take an SOP or a general order to enact? What kind of informal things can law enforcement officers do to change that subculture, to break that barrier for communication, and just learn how to relax?

Rob S.: You know, again, it's practicing communication and breaking down stigma and fear of talking about how you feel, what your emotions are as you go through the day, or certainly after a traumatic incident. And I think trauma debriefings are one way for officers to experience how great it can be to talk about trauma and the aftermath of being involved

in an incident on the job. It takes away the fear of, "What's going to happen to me if I start talking about this?" They learn through experience that, "You know what, not only is this okay, I feel better. I am better. And maybe I need to do this more frequently."

George M.: Yeah. That is good stuff. And you know, Rob, one thing I like to do is I like to play officer optimism once in a while, or officer optimistic as I call it. You know, so often in our jobs, we're trained to look for the worst things in society so that we can stop them, arrest them, and do whatever we have to do to interject in the negative stuff. But what I noticed after so many years of law enforcement was that when you look all day for bad things, then you come home, and you continue to look for bad things. Even on your way home from work, you're seeing expired registrations. You're seeing drug deals. You're seeing shoplifters. And you're not paying attention to the positive things around you.

So, I always like to offer this challenge to the people that attend our classes: while you're out there on your tour of duty, look for positive, optimistic things. And also, that's a great opportunity when you go home to share with your family—the good stuff that you actually see happening.

Let me give you an example of some of the things that I'll look at, because sometimes, finding something positive is a reach, right? But it could be as simple as you're driving through your neighborhood, wherever you work, you actually get out of your car, and you get to talk with people that are shopping in the community. People that feel safe enough to shop because you are doing your job effectively. Or you get to attend a sports game at a local high school where kids can participate in play, once again, because you've provided a safe environment. I mean, don't let your guard down, but enjoy some of the positive things that go on around you and not always focus on the negative. So that way, you can have a more optimistic outlook with this profession because if you want negative, you'll find negative. And sometimes, finding the positive takes a little bit more effort, but I found that to be extremely rewarding, especially when I ask myself, like a lot of other law enforcement officers, "Why do I do this?" Well, I do it because it makes a difference. And I think one thing that everybody should know, on this job—no matter how tough your job is, everybody has tough stuff at their job. But when you lead this career, you are making a difference, especially when you care about yourself and you care about others. It's always going to show. So, that's my two cents on optimism there. I always like to throw that out there because I don't think that we should always focus on the trauma. And I think you can

counteract some of the trauma and negativity that we see when you actually look for something positive.

Rob S.: Absolutely. You know, that's why you have to learn to recover from the stress of the day, so that you do take in positive things and you are able to connect and enjoy life and life's events and family and friends and everything that is outside of your job so that you don't become overwhelmed by negativity, which is sometimes, unfortunately, part of the job depending on where you work in law enforcement and what your daily experiences are.

George M.: Excellent. Well, it looks like our time is just about to wrap up. I just want to summarize with you—and if you don't mind helping me out with this list, but some of the takeaways I got from our conversation today was that one, communication is key. That we need to communicate our feelings with our loved ones, our family members, and even with our coworkers—the people that we spend the majority of our time with. We need to be able to disconnect and relax and enjoy our downtime, and that it is okay to seek resources outside of your immediate circle, whether it be through the Employees Assistance Program. You mentioned something earlier about the privilege of confidentiality. One resource that's often overlooked is the Police Chaplain Corps within your agency. They have more confidentiality privilege than some other people that you may speak to. So, don't forget about them and don't forget about the code word or signal to let your loved ones know or have them let you know that you are still in cop mode and you need to get back into family and friend mode. What else? Did I miss anything?

Rob S.: I think that was pretty good. You're hired.

George M.: Thanks.

Rob S.: Good summary.

George M.: Hey, Rob, I just want to thank you again for joining me today and providing such detail about being well and how to disconnect from the job and sharing that with our listeners.

Rob S.: It was my pleasure. Always good to talk to you.

George M.: Likewise, Rob. The pleasure is mine as well. And for our listeners, I want to encourage you to please visit the SAFLEO website. That is www.S-A-F-L-E-O.org, SAFLEO.org, for more information not only about this topic, but other officer safety and wellness topics that we

cover as part of our SAFLEO Program. So, for all of our listeners, be well and stay safe out there.

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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