**Partnering With Family**

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U.S. Department of Justice. Here’s your host.

Trever: Hello. Welcome and thank you for joining us today for this SAFLEO Sessions podcast. I’m Trever Alsup. I’m a sergeant with the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department and an instructor with the SAFLEO Program. I don’t think anyone would argue with me that communication is a critical part of mental wellness. Effective communication between spouses can be challenging even in strong relationships, and those challenges can be more pronounced when one person is a law enforcement officer.

Here to discuss this topic with me is my wife, Kelly Alsup. Kelly is a civilian investigator also with the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department. We’ve been married for 16 years, and we have learned a few things along the way. We will talk about what we have learned over the years, what works for us, and hopefully give our listeners some insights that will serve to start new conversations. Kelly, thank you for joining me.

Kelly: Oh, you’re welcome, hubby.

Trever: All right. So, to get this started, we met in 2005, and at the time, I’d been on the department for about seven years. In your opinion, and⁠—do you feel that I was better at communication in the early stages of our relationship?

Kelly: I would say yes. I think our communication style was just freer. We had more lighthearted conversations. I think overall, just not being on the department for you for a very long time yet, I think you were more lighthearted. So, I think our conversations and the topics stayed that way as well.

Trever: And if you could put a time frame on it, when do you think that my communication started to dwindle or get worse?

Kelly: Oh, I would have to say it was during your time with your assignment to violent crimes. How many years were you in violent crimes?

Trever: Eight years total.

Kelly: I would have to say by the first or second year in your time at violent crimes is when I started to notice communication changing between the two of us.

Trever: And going off of my memory and my recollection, I would have to say that that’s probably right. And I remember that’s when you started to bring up that my communication was lacking and that it seemed like I was changing.

Kelly: Right. I feel like little things, like how was your day or what do you want to do tonight or what are we having for dinner, everything just seemed to get shorter. That’s when the answers of everything is fine, “My day was fine,” started coming on. And I knew that the type of calls that you went on every day were definitely not fine, they were not okay. The nature of what that assignment was, was pretty heavy, so everything you went on every day was violent in nature. So, coming home every day and hearing, “I’m fine, day was fine, I’m good,” but in how you were acting after work, maybe more silent or something was wrong⁠—I knew that wasn’t the true answer, it was just the easiest answer that you were giving.

Trever: So, I know that we’ve had discussions about this before, but for the sake of people that have not been in our house for these conversations, how did that make you feel?

Kelly: So, kind of like separation⁠—I feel like you were just separating yourself, so I felt in the dark. Like I said, I knew that there was more going on. I knew you were not fine, but I feel like you were shutting me out and kind of just shutting all of us out. Not intentionally, but maybe just dealing with it on your own, which is something that maybe you felt you needed to. Maybe you didn’t want to burden me with the details of the calls or how bad they were, which I can understand on your end as well⁠—you want to leave that at work. You don’t want to bring that home and continue on with what you had to see that day. You want to move on.

But I think it’s important to know and for you to realize when it’s not just the normal day⁠—you had something that you saw that was affecting you more so than other calls. So, maybe that’s the time to say, “I’m not okay. I didn’t have a good day.” Maybe you don’t want to talk about it at that moment, but maybe letting me know that it was especially a hard day for you today.

Trever: And so, for people that don’t know, for our department, violent crimes was a section where our primary job was death investigations. We handled suicides; accidental death; overdoses; homicides; officer-involved shootings; and then, on top of that, it was any shooting or stabbing call. So, that was a very long period of my career that I spent in that unit. And hindsight being 20/20, I wish I could go back and realize that an assignment like that probably should have had a shelf life that probably should have been much shorter than I let it be.

Kelly: Right. So, Trever, let me ask you this, going off of that⁠—as you said, violent crimes was a very tough assignment, mentally, emotionally. Do you think we should have had a conversation about how it was affecting you?

Trever: Absolutely. And I think, again, hindsight being 20/20 and kind of going through and instructing the SAFLEO Program has helped me realize a few things. But my generation [of] law enforcement officer—one of the things you were told from a very, very early age is that you don’t bring work home. And the problem with that is it forces you to internalize everything because you don’t want to burden your family, your spouse, especially your children. You don’t want to burden them with what you’ve seen throughout the day. Well, the problem with that is obvious—that you internalize everything, you keep it inside, you don’t let it out, you don’t discuss or talk about how these calls, on a daily basis, are affecting you.

So, we’re getting a little bit better, and one of the things that is stressed in the SAFLEO Program is partnering with family. And that doesn’t mean that you have to come home and talk about every gory detail of every scene that you were on, but you do have to let your family know what’s going on, how you’re feeling, because they’re the closest ones to you and the ones that are going to see that change. And in my case, before I even saw those changes, I think you were well aware of what was happening to me before I even I saw anything happening.

Kelly: I think so, too.

Trever: I think the reason why I say that is because you told me that and, in my stubbornness, I continued to say that I’m fine. So, I think that absolutely should have been a conversation that we had. I think it might have changed the trajectory of a couple things, probably my career because I think I would’ve realized the effects that it was having on me, but on the home side, it would’ve just let you know what was going on instead of effectively just shutting you out.

Kelly: I completely agree. And how great would it have been to know then what we know now and go back, and just do things differently as far as communication? Like you said, shutting me out, I know, was not your intent, but it is what it felt like. It definitely can feel lonely on the other side when you’re not getting any kind of response because fine or good is like when you pick up your 13-year-old kid from school and you’re like, “How was your day?” “Fine.” So, now you’re getting the same thing from your spouse. It doesn’t feel great.

Again, I can understand not breaking down the entire day when you come home from work. Sometimes on my side, I don’t need to know everything that’s going on. I don’t want to force the conversation. And, Trever, maybe you can chime in here, but I don’t feel like forcing the conversation all the time is the right thing because maybe you do need some time to decompress and process it, and you don’t necessarily want to talk about it. So, I think maybe not forcing it right away, but making it known that, “Hey, Kelly. Yes, I did have a hard day. I did have a bad call. I really don’t want to talk about it right now, but I promise I will when I’m ready.” Do you think that would’ve been something that you could have done?

Trever: To a degree, because here’s the problem is—if I come home and I tell you I had a tough day, I don’t want to talk about it right now, I don’t believe that I’m alone in this. But for me, if I can put it off for 20 minutes, now I can put it off for a couple hours, now I can put it off for a couple days. So, I think—at some point, that conversation does have to be drawn out, but I can see where that’s a slippery slope because you don’t want to pry. Those feelings are not going to go away. And when you push everything down that you’re dealing with it, I always thought that you just push it down, it goes away. You don’t have to worry about it again. But the problem is those feelings go down to the pit of your stomach or somewhere in your body, and they’re not just hanging out in the basement. They’re down there doing steroids, working out, and they’re going to come back with a vengeance.

Kelly: Okay, you come home from work, and I’m giving you some time. You’re going to process your day. Maybe you don’t have the energy to talk about this after 10, 12 hours at work, emotionally and mentally. What could have persuaded you, because now you said, right—so we don’t talk about it that day. Well, what about the next day or the next week or the next month? Is it gone now? Do we not bring it up again because you’re not going to? So, what could I have done maybe better to help you come forward and talk a little bit more about those situations?

Trever: That’s a great question, and I wish that there was an easy answer to it. I don’t think that we’re alone, and I think that over a period of time, when you spend a significant amount of time with somebody, you learn how to read them. And I know from experience that you know how to read me very well, so I would say that give that 20 minutes, 30 minutes, maybe it’s an hour that day, but give that time. And then when you circle back around to it, maybe start it off with, “Hey, I know it was a rough day. You don’t have to tell me all the details, but what kind of call was it?”

Because all you have to do is start that conversation. And I think cops in general, for the most part, we love to talk, so all you have to do is get that conversation started. And once it’s started, everything else will come. Eventually, you’re going to open up more than I would’ve anticipated or wanted to because it’s going to feel good to get that out. So, I think it’s just gentle nudges. I really think that’s what it boils down to is just gentle nudges and at some point, it’s going to start the rock rolling down the hill.

Kelly: I like the gentle nudges, and you’re totally right. So, as the person on the other end that’s feeling shut out, sometimes it’s good to take a step back and instead of being frustrated or annoyed or mad, try to be a little bit understanding of the situation that you’re just not aware of. You don’t know exactly what happened. But we do know, as officers—there’s all sorts of horrible things that you’re seeing, calls are going on, literally life and death problems and situations that you’re trying to solve or deal with. So, I think allowing you the time to process it and then slowly start talking about it as much as you can.

Trever: I agree. And I think that you just brought up another interesting point with decision making because we all get stuck in this rut where you come home after a day, and it’s not like life stops. You’re at work for 8, 10, 12 hours. You come home, and now there’s family things to deal with. And I know that we’ve all been there where you come home, and your spouse will ask you, “What do you want to do for dinner?” And in your mind, you’re thinking to yourself, “I have just been responsible for solving everybody else’s problems, and now I have to come home and solve more problems.”

 I think that one of the things that has helped us recently is setting aside that time, and it’s very important, and we get lost in our lives. I get lost at my work. You get lost in your work. We definitely get lost with the kids and their schedules because it’s completely crazy. But the thing that seems to suffer the most out of that busy schedule is the time that you and I actually get to connect as a husband and wife.

Kelly: Yes.

Trever: So, I guess that kind of leads into—you have to almost build in rituals to keep that aspect of your marriage well.

Kelly: Absolutely.

Trever: If the connection between you and I is not where it needs to be, that’s going to affect my relationship with the kids, your relationship with the kids, relationships with friends, and it just keeps spreading almost like a cancer. So, those little rituals that you kind of build in just to keep each other connected, I think, is a very integral part of keeping that marriage alive and being able to keep that healthy relationship, which helps keep the healthy balance between everything else that’s going on.

Kelly: I completely agree. And without having set those rituals, I think we would be where we were years ago—taking the time to say, “Hey, okay, we’ve talked about work. Let’s move on. Let’s spend time together. Let’s spend time with the kids. Once every two weeks, let’s me and you go out and have dinner or hang out with our friends.” It’s so important to make that a ritual because if you don’t, then you’re like, “Oh, we can’t this weekend, maybe next. Let’s figure it out next weekend.” And next thing you know, it’s been four months, and you haven’t spent any time just as the two of you together.

Trever: Right. And I think that for a lot of people, once they start to feel that disconnect in the marriage, it could start with communication, but then there’s a disconnect in the marriage and now that communication gap widens, and that in itself becomes like a rock rolling down the hill that once that gains momentum. It just keeps getting further and further and further and affecting everything else.

 We’re teaching our officers how to be more resilient, how to handle stress, and cope with stress better. Everything gets so tied into each other—if you have a problem at home, it’s going to affect work. If you’re having problems at work, it’s going to affect home.

I wish that I would’ve had resiliency training when I was young in my career. I think that it would’ve saved so many problems that I had internally, that I affected our marriage, that affected other relationships. And that, if we can truly teach our officers to be more resilient, to have good communication strategies, and to cope with that stress better, I just think that not only does it affect their work, it affects their home, it keeps them more healthy. And if you’re in a healthy place yourself, I really think that you’re able to communicate with everybody in a much better way.

Kelly: Right. So, I think as a spouse of a law enforcement officer there, keeping an open mind and knowing in the back of your head that as law enforcement officers, you’ll undergo a lot of trauma. The job comes with a heavy cost to your mental well-being and a heavy cost to the family. PTSD comes into play or could—depression could. I think, at the very least as a spouse, trying to remember and making the time to ask your law enforcement spouse, “What do they need? What can I do to help you?” Do you think that would be helpful, Trever?

Trever: I do. But at the same time, if your spouse is coming to you with that, you have to be self-aware enough to realize that something is going on and self-aware enough to not be afraid to seek help somewhere. It’s funny because you brought up the depression and PTSD, and I remember a couple times you asking me if I thought that I was depressed, and I know that I always said no. And I think it was because I wasn’t self-aware enough to, number one, know the symptoms of what being depressed was. And number two, just not wanting to admit that there was a problem.

 Because in my mind, I was never in a bad mood. There was never anything wrong. But clinically, depression is so much more than just a bad mood. So yes, the answer to your question is yes. But at the same time, we have to be self-aware enough to know that something is happening or something is wrong.

So, I guess the underlying theme of today is how important communication is and how, if that’s not the foundation of your relationship, then cracks are going to develop.

Kelly: Oh, 100%, Trever. And I really truly think communication is one of the largest downfalls. And I wish, just like you said, I wish in the academies or right after an academy, they really took the time, all departments took the time to really talk about these kinds of things that we’ve talked about today because it’s only going to serve their own department, making the mental health and awareness of their officers for the rest of their career. Maybe if somebody had planted that seed in your head from the beginning, you would’ve recognized certain things earlier.

Trever: Let’s be honest, I would change a lot of things, but if I could pinpoint one thing I wish early in my life, I would’ve learned how to be a better communicator—how to actually express myself so that it didn’t leave so many people in the dark.

Kelly: So, what do you think? We’ve talked about kind of everything we’ve done wrong.

Trever: But we’re still married, so something must have happened, right?

Kelly: We’re still married. Yep, we’re doing something right, but what do you think some of the rituals that we’ve created, the best rituals we’ve created that help us now communicate better?

Trever: So, I think just that one-on-one connection, I think that that’s something that’s improved, and you and I take the time. And it’s easy now—our kids are older, they’re a little bit more self-sufficient, so you and I can go out for an evening. You and I can go out and have dinner. Whereas when they were younger, that was very hard to do.

Kelly: Right.

Trever: So, now we make sure that we take that time, that we’ll kind of do a debrief of the workday, and then we’ll move on to family stuff, kids’ stuff, us stuff.

Kelly: Yes.

Trever: And it’s just important not to neglect any aspect.

Kelly: So, without the open communication that we now have, we wouldn’t be aware of maybe what’s going on with me, what’s going on with you, what’s going on with the kids.

Trever: So, Kelly, earlier you and I talked about how communication was almost easy in the beginning of our relationship, and then it took a turn, and we identified that time as right about the time that I went to violent crimes, which was a very tough assignment on me, and I would say, for quite a few years, we suffered in communication.

Kelly: It’s only been the past handful of years that you and I have gotten on the same page, right? Would you agree?

Trever: I agree completely. We spent quite a few years in—

Kelly: Many years. How we’re still together, I don’t know. I really love you.

Trever: Ditto.

Kelly: But really, in seriousness, that is a lot of years to have gone kind of flying blind with all the stuff that we’ve been saying. I wish there was somebody that came in and said, “You guys, this is what you need to do,” and so we could have stopped this so many years ago. We have a set way of how we do things, and I would never say communication is an issue right now. Would you agree?

Trever: I agree. And I really kind of think that probably the turning point was me just realizing the emotional toll that this career has taken on me, and not being afraid to seek some kind of a help for that emotional toll.

Kelly: Trever, you hit it on the nail. This was never going to change until you got to the point where you did. You hit a point where you were slapped in the face with self-realization that something had to change, something had to give, and you had to seek that help out. And had you not gotten to that point, I don’t know where we would be right now, so that’s really the best thing that could have happened.

Trever: I agree. Without open communication, there’s no way that we would’ve turned that corner and that things would be where they are now.

Kelly: Trever, I’m glad that we had this real discussion about how important open communication is and the effectiveness it’s had in our personal relationship.

We would like to thank our listeners for joining us in this important discussion about the need for open and effective communication between spouses. We hope that our insight has given you some good ideas for how to start the conversation and how to build a strong foundation for your own communication styles.

For important information on this topic and other officer safety and wellness issues, I encourage our listeners to visit SAFLEO 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 find us on social media and visit safleo.org, that’s S-A-F-L-E-O.org.

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