



# Importance of Supporting Mindfulness for Law Enforcement

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Michon M.: Hi, I'm Michon Morrow with the National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers Program through the Bureau of Justice Assistance and host for this podcast. I'm a captain at the Lincoln, Nebraska, Police Department with 23 years of experience.

I work on wellness topics daily at our department with our wellness program. It's a topic that I'm passionate about. And today, I'm joined by Janet Sandman and Chris Davis. We will be discussing mindfulness and the practice of mindfulness through meditation and yoga and how this can benefit our officers' stress levels and overall mental health and hopefully impact them before we get to troubled waters. Janet, I want to start with you and let you introduce yourself and how you came to be involved with mindfulness and meditation.

Janet S.: Thanks, Michon. I spent a little over 21 years as a cross-trained police officer, firefighter, and paramedic, in the North Texas area. I'm also a Desert Storm veteran. And I noticed at some point about midway through my career that I really began to struggle, I started to change. I had a difficult time with anxiety, which I'd never experienced before, I was unable to sleep, I constantly felt on guard and hypervigilant 24/7. It was starting to impact my performance at work; it was impacting my

relationship with my husband. And, in looking back, I had this perfect life; it was really a great life, but I was to the point where I hated everything about it, and that sort of surprised me. And even after retirement, I felt exactly the same way. And I remember waking up one morning and realizing that I was not willing to spend the rest of my life feeling this way.

So, I started doing some research. I kept coming across this word mindfulness, and as I started digging into it, I noticed that there was a lot of research behind it, and out of desperation, it's basically how I found meditation, and it changed everything for me. All of the pieces of me started shifting back into place again. So, I had this epiphany that this was really my next calling for me. I need to teach other law enforcement officers how to meditate and just to show them that there was something out there that could potentially help them navigate their careers and the stress that this job brings more skillfully.

Michon M.: Thank you for sharing your story. And I also want to thank you for your service, not only in law enforcement, to our country. Chris, I want to give you the same opportunity. Could you share with us how you came involved with mindfulness in your practice?

Chris D.: Sure. Thanks, Michon. My name is Chris Davis. I was with the Fayetteville, North Carolina, Police Department and home of Fort Bragg for some of you, for a little over 25 years. I retired as an assistant police chief in February 2018.

How I came into practicing yoga, I did a little bit with my wife here and there. And back in 2014, we got a new police chief, and to make a long story short, I had a very difficult time with some organizational stress situations. During this time, one of my coworkers challenged me to a yoga challenge, which included going to as many yoga classes as you could in 30 days. I think I went to around 20–22 classes, and I didn't go into the challenge thinking that yoga was going to make me better, make me feel better, it's just one of those things that happened, and slowly, but surely, I started to get better to the point where, surprisingly to me, the police chief that I was having some issues with actually promoted me to captain. And then, approximately 14 months later, promoted me to an assistant chief.

Michon M.: I love that. Thank you for sharing your story. I think it is so commendable to hear both of you having some negative experiences. Chris, I think that so many of our listeners can understand that organizational stress and difficulties dealing with our leadership. And Janet, just, how powerful to recognize that this life that should be so

wonderful and that you're not feeling that, though I assume that people on the outside looking in would think, "She's got this great life, but internally there's these struggles." And for both of you to be able to take a step back and look for something to help create different outcomes for you is just tremendous, and then sharing it today, thank you.

So, you both mentioned mindfulness, I want to just touch a little bit on, for our listeners who really aren't sure, that haven't done that research yet or had it available at their departments, what exactly is mindfulness?

Janet S.: So, when we talk about mindfulness, all that really means is that's just having the ability to be in the present moment in a nonjudgmental way. And what I mean by that is you're not trying to push things away, you're not getting all caught up in some storyline about what's happening, you're not demanding that it be different than it is. It's just being in it while you're in it.

And when we can do that, when we can become more focused on what's happening right now, that helps get us off autopilot. We spend about 50 percent of our time either in the past or the future, we're either rehearsing, fretting about, or worrying about something that hasn't happened and may not ever happen or our minds are off to the past where we're ruminating, critiquing, being self-critical about a decision we made, a choice we made, an action we took, even reliving a traumatic event, and doing that often activates the stress response all over again. So, mindfulness is really about training our minds to be more focused, more engaged, less emotionally reactive.

Michon M.: So, mindfulness helps us live more in the moment?

Chris D.: Absolutely. The present moment is the only time that we can make decisions that will impact the future. If you're fully present, fully focused on what you're doing, that decision that you're going to make in the present moment is going to determine a big part of your future life and it's also going to affect the person that you're dealing with, their future life as well.

Michon M.: That's really interesting. So, if we take it in that context, do we learn from this that it gives you a little bit more control in that moment to see things more clearly and make better decisions?

Chris D.: I would say absolutely. It makes us make better decisions, more informed decisions, more thoughtful decisions, more compassionate

decisions, which ultimately benefit, of course, the officer and the people and the community that we're dealing with.

And Michon, one thing I would like to add is that we're talking about officers here, which are truly the most important part or the backbone of any department, but let's not forget leaders, command staff.

It's often difficult. As leaders, we're in charge of folks and we want to appear as strong and confident as possible, so just being able to take that leap and being vulnerable and admitting that we're going through a difficult time or need some help is very difficult for a lot of people. And until we get past the point as a profession where we can do that a little more easily, we're going to continue to have problems with mental health and, unfortunately, officer suicide.

Michon M.: We should be doing all that we can to support our officers so we can better their outcomes, so we can make sure that they don't end up having significant issues in their career.

I want to go back, Janet, when you were talking about that stress response that we activate it, sometimes, I assume, unnecessarily by reliving or questioning past events or what may happen in the future, when we activate that stress response, how does that affect our body?

Janet S.: Really the activation of the stress response, it impacts every single part of our body. This ocean of hormones is dumped, like adrenaline and cortisol, and then our body does what it's supposed to do. It tries to take care of us, so it elevates the heart rate, it changes your blood chemistry, it sends the blood to your muscles so you can fight or flee.

And so, this takes a toll on our mental health, physical health, even our emotional health over time, especially when we're not giving our bodies an opportunity to discharge those stress hormones, when we're not giving our bodies an opportunity to release that stress.

Another component to that, too, is we need to really work on normalizing the stress response and that this is what happens normally, and it is a common consequence of what happens to people when their stress response is activated over and over and over again, and the stress accumulates. And I guarantee you there are people out there, like me, who thought I must be the only one, I just can't handle this, maybe it's me, everybody else seems to be doing fine.

Michon M.: And Janet, I want to talk just a little bit about how mindfulness ties into just our overall awareness, maybe not necessarily just with situations

that we're in, stressful events, but maybe, do we understand our bodies better?

Janet S.: So, when we're talking about mindfulness, it's something that we need to do regularly, on a regular basis, just like you would do physical exercise. And so, when we do this mindfulness training on a regular basis, whether it's meditation or yoga, it trains us, we're actually training the brain, and it trains us to start recognizing our habitual thought patterns, our habitual behavior patterns, our go-to when we're stressed or when something triggers us. We start to learn these patterns.

It can even be an indicator that, yeah, I'm not handling this as well as I should be, or I'm really struggling with this. That leads us then to having an awareness that we may need to ask for help in dealing with something.

Mindfulness training, as I mentioned earlier, it trains us to continue to reorient to the present moment over and over and over again because that's what you're doing in yoga and that's what you're doing in meditation.

Mindfulness training on a regular basis starts to create this space, this space between who we are, ourselves, this person, and the event or the decision or the situation so that we don't over-identify with it so all of a sudden I'm feeling really sad, or boy, this feels like I'm depressed.

It doesn't jump to, "I'm a horrible, miserable, depressed person," it becomes more of a, "Hey, this is my experience right now, this is the experience in my mind, this is the experience in my body, but I'm not my depression, I'm not my mistake. This doesn't define me, that I'm more than that." And so when we have that space we're less likely to get caught up in that narrative that's going over and over and over in our mind, much of the time being self-critical. We can gain perspective.

Michon M.: We've talked about stress and that connection to stress, but is there a connection to then affecting depression, benefiting depression, our officers that are dealing with those stresses, and ultimately hopefully changing a path that could lead to the most unfortunate and that is losing a life to suicide?

I want to get real here, sometimes we don't know what we prevent but we need to do it anyway because we need to do the right thing for our officers. And there are events that lead up to that point that intervention, successful intervention, could save a life.

Chris D.: I would definitely agree. And one word, surprisingly, I don't think we've used so far in this podcast is resilience. I'm convinced that mindfulness training makes officers more resilient, which is going to make them less susceptible to getting depressed and ultimately to the point where they're contemplating suicide. And when, and if, they do start to get a little bit depressed, I think it's going to lessen the level of depression, and it's also going to give them the ability to bounce back quicker via noticing what is causing that depression and being able to more appropriately deal with the cause and ultimately become or feel better.

Michon M.: Yeah. Janet?

Janet S.: Yeah. What I was going to add to that is a lot of that goes back to finding ways to mitigate the negative effects of stress because we know that one of the negative consequences of chronic stress can be depression and suicide ideation. And when we're depressed, that really messes with our ability to see things objectively, to see things accurately. It makes it hard for, when you're depressed, to even know what you need or to see that there's a winnable solution at all.

We can get really overwhelmed. We feel self-critical, we have these feelings of regret, or shame, or anger, or fear attached to this narrative going around and around in our head. And what I mentioned earlier that mindfulness, whether it's yoga or meditation, can help you have the awareness to identify that, yeah, I'm struggling here, it can help us have techniques where we can reorient to right now, this moment, my breath, I'm breathing in, I'm breathing out, I'm breathing in, I'm breathing out. And every time we do that, that's less time that we're caught up in that narrative of self-criticism or regret or rumination.

Michon M.: And when we talk about meditation and specifically on depression, because I want to be very cautious in the event that we have a listener who is currently struggling and maybe in the throes of depression, is it solely the meditation, is this a piece of it, and what more advice do we give them if they're at that point right now, at that critical moment?

Janet S.: What I would say is if you have a teacher that you're working with in meditation, that's great. And the other thing is, if you are trying meditation on your own, and Chris may agree with this, as far as yoga is concerned too, and really intense emotions come up and you feel like they're too intense for right now, then you can stop, and then perhaps do meditation in conjunction with a mental health professional.

Janet S.: Primarily if you have been involved in a traumatic incident and if trauma is involved, it's very helpful if you learn meditation or use meditation that's facilitated by someone who's trained in trauma-informed mindfulness, or trauma-sensitive mindfulness is another phrase for that, because it can be activated.

Chris D.: And Michon, I would add, I totally agree with what Janet said. If you're in the position where you're contemplating suicide, it's probably not the time to strictly focus on meditation and/or yoga, although I think it would be a good time to start, in conjunction with seeking proper mental health assistance from a professional.

Janet S.: And I would agree with that. If you are having suicidal thoughts, going into that emotion is probably not going to be helpful. And so, we really encourage mindfulness to be done on the front end. I compare it to, we use mindfulness like a vitamin in a preventive way so that when we do bump up against those challenges, we're able to navigate them more skillfully and maybe either move through them with a little bit more ease or at least recognize when we're getting overwhelmed.

Michon M.: I just think that that is so powerful, and it's something that we need to remind ourselves on a daily basis in our organizations of doing the right thing and being out in front of these issues to further support our officers.

So, I want to talk a little bit about that cultural piece. In law enforcement sometimes we have this hard outer core and strong Type A personalities where we're not really good at that self-reflection and admitting when we're struggling. And mindfulness and the practice of yoga and meditation can benefit us, but how do we best sell that in our organizations? Where does it start? Where do we start these conversations in our organizations?

Janet S.: I'd like to start really with talking about the leadership. I spent many years as a leader in the military and a leader in policing, and I got some things wrong, but the one thing I think I got right was this duty to care, and it's a duty to care for and about the whole individual. And I think sometimes that gets lost. We become so focused on performance, and if you do XYZ, then that's all I care about and I don't care about the rest of it, but there's no separating it.

And while we're good, we think we're good anyway, at compartmentalizing things, it's bleeding over, and it does impact performance. It impacts performance at work, it impacts performance

at home. So, I think it's really, really critical that we take on this responsibility to care for and about the people that we're leading.

We have to communicate the message that we are here for you without judgment, without criticism. We have to communicate that we're here to support you, you are not alone in this. And that can be challenging because that's the messy stuff. That's the messy stuff that we have a tendency to say, "Yeah, I'm going to leave that to them, I only want to deal with the work stuff."

Michon M.: Right. That's that F word, right, feelings. We have to acknowledge feelings. Chris, did you have anything to add?

Chris D.: Yes. In reference to implementing mindfulness into department, one thing I would definitely suggest is to start at the, if you run your own academy, to start at the academy level, for a couple reasons. One, there's some built-in time there for PT that you may be able to set aside for mindfulness practice, whether it'd be once or twice a week. Two, recruits are generally younger and maybe a little, have been exposed to mindfulness in the past and a little more open-minded to something new. And three, and I think what's most important, it gives them a skill set that they can use throughout their career instead of waiting till something awful has happened in their life, like Janet and I refer to, that they're better able to deal with those types of situations.

As far as officers that are already officers, have been there for a while, there will be some individuals within each department that would be open to doing some mindfulness training, and I think if you get some key people that are well respected within your department and are open-minded and willing to do the training over a period of time, seek the benefits, word's going to get around that the squared-away officers are doing this, they're doing well, and they speak highly of the training. And so eventually, hopefully it would filter into the rest of the department.

Janet S.: A couple of ways that you could bring this to your department, and I'm sure it's going to be similar in ways to Chris, is—I really think it needs to start and go from recruitment all the way through retirement. It really needs to be woven throughout the entire department.

There are online resources and meditation apps, there are courses that you can take online in mindfulness-based stress reduction, mindful self-compassion, VALOR training programs, and so forth. You might consider partnering with local meditation teachers, mindfulness centers that are in the area, maybe partnering for them to come out to your



agency and teach a class or even offer a regular meditation. Some agencies even have a resilience room set aside at their departments so that officers have a place to go when they need to reset or if they want to set aside some time to do meditation. There's even a course that you could send officers to where they could become a peer mindfulness training mentor so they could come back and help with mindfulness training in your agency.

A couple of the things that you can lead with in the department is lead with the science, lead with the proven benefits of mindfulness and equate those benefits to specific law enforcement skill sets. In addition to the practices of yoga and meditation, offer mindfulness tools, which are these just short, in-the-moment tools that law enforcement officers can use at stressful times.

Chris D.: And Michon, you mentioned Type A personalities, which many law enforcement officers are, and then you've got the typical SWAT guy or girl who's Type A+ personality, if you're not able or successful at appealing to the mindfulness aspect of yoga, I personally think it's a good idea maybe to appeal to the performance aspect. The typical SWAT operator's very aware or very cognizant of their training and their ability to perform well under pressure. Well, if you can show them or tell them that they'll be able to perform better in a high-stress SWAT situation because of this mindfulness, maybe that'll be just enough of the door opening where you can get your foot in and do some mindfulness.

And think about it from this standpoint, once you get a SWAT team and they're doing well, getting the basic poses down, don't have to look at the instructor all the time, and they want to continue improving their performance, what about having them do yoga with their gas mask on or with their entry vest on—kind of that reality-based training, you know? If they can perform well, control their breath in this controlled environment with their gear on, then ideally they're going to be able to do it in a real SWAT-type situation.

Janet S.: There are many Olympic athletes, professional athletes, elite military forces that are using mindfulness. So, we're really not at the forefront on this with law enforcement, we've got trailblazers who've come before us. And I think some of that makes it more acceptable for law enforcement officers to give it a try.

Michon M.: I agree. I think we are behind the curve, and I think that we are at a pivotal moment in law enforcement and our relationships with our communities that we need to go above and beyond to make sure that

we are providing all of the resources that we can for our officers to be successful out on the street. It does. It's very clear that it can help with our performance and at the end of the day, show support and caring because that's what they need. They really need their organizations to value them as a human being. As an officer that is going out every day and caring for those on the street in our communities, then that we need to do the same for them.

Janet S.: It is not enough anymore for our officers to merely survive their careers, and you can probably detect some emotion in my voice. We really need to offer them tools that help them thrive, to end their careers ready to take on this full life.

Chris D.: One thing, Michon, I don't want to forget about those officers that do something wrong or are responsible for the situation that they're in and because of what they did they are going through these mental health issues that we're talking about.

It's been a long road for me and it's a continuous process to go back to the mindfulness of being nonjudgmental. Say, for example, an officer is responding to a call, blue lights and siren, he looks down at his computer just to get some additional information on the call and somebody walks out in front of his car and that person ends up dying. That truly was an accident, but I know that officer's going to feel terrible for the victim and himself and for all the family members involved.

Those are issues that he's going to have to deal with, the department's going to have to deal with, but be compassionate, be as nonjudgmental as possible when you're dealing with the folks that may have created their own situation. Does that make sense?

Michon M.: Makes perfect sense, that we see this on a regular basis in our organizations, that sometimes there tends to be this separation of the department and this officer who maybe has violated policies and procedures, significantly so. And we miss opportunities to recognize that we can still support them, we can still value them, that we still need to provide the resources for—even if they can no longer be in law enforcement, but that we value them enough that we recognize we want to provide opportunities for them to overcome so they can have a successful life outside of law enforcement that we just can't quit.

Chris D.: You said it perfectly.

Janet S.: I think I'd be remiss if I didn't mention self-compassion. We often just use the word compassion and direct it outward to everybody else but

ourselves, and in situations like that, even when we can find fault or blame, self-compassion can be a way for us to move through that.

And I know self-compassion was instrumental in my personal growth and transition into having a life that I love now, and it's something that is also incorporated into mindfulness training as well. This concept of treating ourselves the same way we would treat our partner or friend, our best friend who was having the exact same struggle, just treating ourselves that same way. What would you say to a friend? Then say that to yourself.

Michon M.: Yeah, we're pretty hard on ourselves, there's no question. But I just want to tell you, Janet, that every time I hear you say how much you love your life, it makes me smile. And just as me to you and me to the listeners and what I want for my organization is that exact same thing. I want to hear that we've provided the resources that they need so they can look at their life now, they can look into the future, and they can be happy and they can say, "I love my life."

I want to ask before we end today, Janet and Chris both . . . we've talked about mindfulness and the practice of meditation and yoga, clearly, the benefits to law enforcement officers and in our organizations as a whole as we try to impact the organizational stress that we deal with day in and day out before we even step outside into the community for a call for service or that traffic stop.

There's scientific data. We know that we're behind the curve, that there are those that have come well before us that are succeeding with their practices and performing better, having better outcomes, I suspect less depression, less of those stressful events and able to adapt and overcome resiliency, Chris, the word that you used, that's such a powerful word. And the duty to care, Janet, that we just have to care about and value our officers who are out working for us every single day, helping us meet our organizational goals, those abiding by that mission.

I want our listeners and organizations, leaders, to go to bed every single night knowing that you've done everything that you can and you've provided the resources necessary, and this is a resource, this is a tool that could save a life, and go to bed knowing that, that you did your best. It's powerful, and lives can be saved. Janet?

Janet S.: I was just going to say that it has always come back to me, the question of, or the remembering my why. Why did I want to become a police leader? Why do I want to be a supervisor when it's so hard to do? And

just stay connected to that why because that's where you will really ground yourself and be more open, then, to trying something new. Why not try something new?

Every time you try something new, in bringing in some new wellness initiative, whether it's chair massage, or meditation, or yoga, or counseling, every time, even if you just brought someone in for one time or one time for each shift, it sends that message that this is acceptable, that it's okay if you do this, we just want you to know it's out there, we want to take care of you. It goes back to that phrase again, we're here for you, I'm here for you.

Michon M.: Absolutely. And that's what we need from our leaders, to be there for our officers. We need courageous leadership and the ability to understand that being vulnerable is not a weakness, that in fact showing vulnerability allows for healing and for others to come forward and address their own concerns, stresses, maybe depression that they're dealing with and creates a caring, open culture where, hopefully at the end of the day, we all are thriving.

Chris D.: And if you think about it, police chiefs have . . . I think Michon, you mentioned earlier in the podcast, this is the, in my mind, in the 30 years I've been in law enforcement or have been around law enforcement, this is the most opportune time to implement this type of program that I've ever seen in 30 years. If our officers haven't gone through enough in the last 12, 24 months, then I don't know what to say.

Michon M.: Yeah. And I think that we need to do it with, not just courage, but with transparency and with pride that we're taking these steps because our communities need to know that we care about our officers because our communities is where our next officers are going to come from. And those community members need to know that coming into law enforcement, you will be cared for and that this is a safe place to thrive. As you deal with stresses, that we'll be here for you, that we're going to support you and we're going to give you those tools that you will need throughout your career to build your resiliency, to lessen the impact of the trauma that you'll experience, and hopefully, divert depression and save that life.

Chris D.: Well, and I would add that not only for the future law enforcement officers in communities, but the officers that are presently serving our communities, if they're in a better place mentally, physically, and spiritually, they're going to be in a better place when they deal with that individual citizen or the community as a whole. And ultimately, the department, the city, the county is going to benefit.

Michon M.: Absolutely. It builds that legitimacy that we know that if our officers are cared for and supported that they take that out, and that is replicated and reflected in the relationships that they build with the community members.

So, for our listeners out there, if you want to get more information about the SAFLEO Program, or if you want to speak with Chris or Janet directly, please let us know through our website. I would also like to encourage our listeners to visit the SAFLEO website at [www.S-A-F-L-E-O.org](http://www.S-A-F-L-E-O.org). Until next time, please be 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](http://safleo.org), that's S-A-F-L-E-O.org. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

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