



Smash the Stigma

Speaker 1: You are listening to a SAFLEO Sessions Podcast, a production of the National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers Program. The SAFLEO Program is funded through grants from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, BJA, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The points of view and opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the podcast authors and do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. Here's your host.

Floyd W.: Hi, I'm Floyd Wiley. I am an instructor with the VALOR Officer Safety and Wellness Program and the host for this edition of the SAFLEO Podcast. This edition is part of our Foundational Concept Series, where we explore how SAFLEO foundational topics can be applied in different situations. I'm joined today by John Bouthillette. He's a retired chief of police of South River Police Department in New Jersey. He's also one of our lead instructors for the SAFLEO and the VALOR programs. Good morning, John. How are you doing?

John B.: Good, Floyd. How are you?

Floyd W.: I'm doing outstanding. Hey, listen—today, John, I just really want to discuss the concept of smashing the stigma and how it's important for leaders, especially our frontline mid-level leaders, to establish an organizational culture of safety and wellness in their agencies. You know, it's reported that more officers die each year by suicide than in the line of duty. Identifying the exact number of those suicides is difficult, as you know, and the number of suicides fluctuate each year. But we would be hard-pressed to find any cop with more than a few years on a job who hasn't been touched by or know someone that has died by suicide.

John B.: Yeah. That's the sad part about the concept here, Floyd.

Floyd W.: You know what I mean?

John B.: Yeah.

Floyd W.: So, what I want to do today is—while those numbers fluctuate by department, the type of agency, regionally, the suicide rate among law enforcement officers has outpaced the general public. So, let's talk about why does this keep happening? What are some of the steps that we can take to save those who feel helpless to save themselves? And is there something about cops, the job, the culture that has us predisposed for this type of unfortunate incident?

John B.: I think we'll focus mostly, Floyd, on the last two. Is it the job, and is it the police culture? Yeah, that has a lot to do with it. The bottom line is there's a certain amount of stressors that are baked into the cake of this profession we call law enforcement—where we know that we took this job, we swore that we'll do this job to the best of our abilities. We assumed a certain level of risk and certain level of danger, and we all take it willingly. We have no problem with that. We all step into the fray. We all do what we have to do.

But what we couldn't even imagine when we first took this job was the level of stress that we would encounter, the level of what we call the impact of human condition on you as a law enforcement officer. It's very difficult to prepare somebody for that. So, what happens is we take these people who want to be cops, we train them as best we can in the academy. And then we stick them out on the road, and we expect them to be these automatic robots with no feelings who can look at these things that they see every single day, deal with the issues they deal with every single day, and not be negatively impacted by what they see. We've been doing that for decades, Floyd. We've been doing that for decades.

When I first got on, the big thing about being a cop was that bravado, that machismo. We created this stigma by saying, "We're not allowed to show empathy. We're not allowed to let people know that we're having an issue or something has had such a negative impact on us that I can't sleep or maybe I started drinking harder or I'm having problems at home." We have always taught officers from way back, for decades, as I said before that, "Suck it up. Put on your big boy—put on your big girl pants. Tape a band aid on it and move on." We're supposed to be immune to the things that we see in the street. That's the police culture that I got bought into. As we travel, and you know because you travel as much as I do, as you travel around the country, we encounter that same culture over and over and over again.

Floyd W.: You know what, though, John? One thing that you brought up—and before we get too far away from it as you talk about it, this happens from the academy, from the very beginning. When guys and girls come out on the street, we're really good at teaching them officer survival, right?

John B.: Absolutely.

Floyd W.: From the very beginning. But we never touched on it. You and I have talked about it because it's affected both of us. We've never really talked about the emotional survival. Who really taught you that when you came out academy? For me, it was nobody.

John B.: Yep. Let's be realistic. Look at two concepts. We'll take the concept of officers who died by suicide versus the concept of, let's say, another thing inside law enforcement when we talk about training, which is firearms, right?

Floyd W.: Right.

John B.: Firearms are easy. It's ABC, it's sight picture, breath control, trigger squeeze. That will never change. That's how we deal with that situation. So, we've got an ABC in that. There's no ABC to suicide because every individual's different. Everybody in the agency may have the same weapon and carry the same gun and are trained the same way and that—that works for that concept, for that skill. But when it comes to dealing in coping mechanisms and the things that we encounter in the job—we are all different. There's not one specific type of cop. There are people who are police officers, and all the people come with basically their own levels of vicarious trauma, things they brought with them from their past, things they bring with them with their experience on the job. So, it's different. So, it's very hard to put that into a box.

Floyd W.: I agree.

John B.: Yeah. That's what the problem is.

Floyd W.: You know what, John? The other side of that is that—and we look at it from a perspective where one person may look at it like, "Listen, my problem's not as bad as the other one." But I can tell you, you can drown in three feet of water just as quickly as you can drown in 20 feet of water. Would you agree?

John B.: So well-stated. The interesting thing here is—what we have is this whole culture for decades where it said that we're machines, that we know

we're not bothered anything that we see. What happens is over the course of a lifetime, we see things that no one should ever have to see, but we live with it. We have to deal with it. We deal with the things that the general public has no idea that we deal with or would have no interest in dealing with themselves. We see the worst of the worst.

Floyd W.: So many things are what nightmares are made of. Right?

John B.: Every single day, and it creates nightmares in ourselves. Always the stigma is if you ask for help, then you are unfit for duty. What the problem is that stigma—that if I say I am in crisis or if I raise my hand and ask for help, then I am unfit for duty. You and I both know that unfit for duty means losing your job. So, we draw that line real quickly. If I raise my hand, I'm unfit, and if I'm unfit, I'm going to get fired. That's what's caused a lot that stigma to develop.

Floyd W.: Nobody wants to come forward and discuss anything because of that fact.

John B.: Yeah. The problem is before we can even start talking about smashing the stigma, we have to talk about leadership. In other words, we have to have a paradigm shift now—leaders approach concept of officer safety and wellness, especially emotional wellness. And how that—we have to understand that they are humans and it's okay to not be okay. Until we get our leaders, both at the top of the organizations and our mid-line supervisors, to understand that it's okay to ask for help, that stigma's not going anywhere. So, not only am I going to put the onus of this conversation on officers—they have to raise their hand and ask for help. But also, we have to have supervisors who have a belief that asking for help is a sign that they want to be okay and they're going to do everything they can to make them okay. Because going home is just not enough. It's going home healthy that counts.

So, for this discussion, when it comes to stigma—stigma is controlled a lot of times by the agency. It's controlled by the agency. It's controlled by policy. It's controlled by formal and informal policy, Floyd. I think you know what I mean. There's the written word in our policies and procedures, and then there's the unwed written word—how we actually operate inside that roll call room and inside the locker room. So, that's the problem. We put out these policies and procedures that we'll have peer support, chaplain programs, EAP—all these processes and procedures set up to offer help. That's great on the front side of the house, but in the back side of the house, we still have that stigma that's created a lot of times by our supervisors that says, "Asking for help means you're weak, and I don't want to work with a weak cop."

Floyd W.: Right. So, first thing we've got to do is we've got to get that educational component in—in terms of that. Then the second portion, fill the audience in on—as a servant leader that's engaged, how do you approach that, on a day-to-day basis, your connectivity to your subordinates and your span of control?

John B.: That servant leadership is huge, Floyd. Both of us have practiced that in our careers, the idea is that this is bigger than you. It's not the rank that you carry, but how you carry yourself. A servant leader not only knows what the policies and procedures are that run what they do, the how and the what of what they do, but they have to understand the why it's important to take care of their people. Taking care of the people is an everyday event. It doesn't happen every Saturday or every other Tuesday. Every single day, they have to have the radar up. They have to be paying attention to their people. They have to show the people that they care.

Still going to hold them accountable, Floyd—let's make sure we understand that. Still hold them accountable, still make sure they're doing their job. But on the flip side of the equation, provide that level of leadership where they can be accessible that allows our officers to come to them with issues and hopefully catch those issues real soon in that early intervention system. Catch them early on where we can deal with them in a much easier, lower level than have this thing blow up to a point where we're talking about firing a cop because of the fact that maybe it's an alcoholism problem, or domestic violence issue, or maybe it's an excessive use of force issue.

We allow these things to kind of fester and grow when—if we would just have supervisors who show empathy, supervisors who understand that the job is tough, supervisors to have that open-door policy, who allow the people to come talk to them and know where to send them for help, that's your servant leader. That is your servant leader. It's the difference between—we don't want to make people come to work, we want to make people *want* to come to work. So, how do we make them want to come into this job? That's the big difference. I can make you do just about anything as a supervisor, but how do I make you want to do what I want you to do? That's that servant leader.

Floyd W.: Right. And have that relationship so that when you see these minor things—an officer all of a sudden who's always squared away comes to work and his uniform is disheveled, or that officer that you happened to hear that so and so was out late and he had a little too much to drink and it's picked up a pattern, that you kind of have an idea and a feel for your people. You talk about deviance and dysfunction versus

wellness and health of your officers. Can you kind of touch on that in the perspective of how some of these things move to issues of ideations of suicide and how officers sometimes take a downturn in their career?

John B.: So, let's talk about that for a second. Remember, the law enforcement culture itself values strength, self-reliance, our ability to control our emotions, and competency in handling personal problems. Because we deal so much with everybody else's problem, it's just assumed that we can deal with our own. That's number one. So, you take that, and you think about that for a second. They think that's an autopilot event, that just put them in uniform, give them their academy training, and everything else will work out. We don't realize that if we don't continually monitor, we don't provide support. What happens is things start to unravel. Things start to wobble.

So, from a culture based on strengths, self-reliance, and controlled emotions, if we start thinking things, or having trouble sleeping, or maybe we're going home and having arguments with our wife because we're getting so stressed, maybe we're having a physical ailments, maybe we're a high blood pressure, prediabetic, obesity, all those things that start happening—this starts have a really negative impact on our level of performance in the streets. So, what happens is we start dropping off. In other words, what we were in the academy no longer holds true five years down the road. When we start losing our way, and we start having health problems, and we start having personal issues, that impacts how we perform on the street so much. Then what happens is we start seeing that deviance and dysfunction. We have officers who are cutting corners, absenteeism, who are just making bad decisions on the street. It just keeps growing and growing and growing.

When you look at—as strictly as a bad cop, a deviance and dysfunction problem, and that becomes an internal affairs event. We spend a lot of times in law enforcement working on what we call internal affairs events. What we really should be focusing on it's not so much an internal affairs event, it's a wellness issue. If we put as much money and effort into the wellness of our people, it will greatly reduce the amount of deviance and dysfunction that happens on the internal affairs side of the house. So, we're trying to say is that emotional wellness—that whole wellness component, it's part of the whole process of creating an organizational culture of wellness and safety. It makes better cops. Better cops should do better work.

Floyd W.: That all comes down to a relationship and knowing your people and being in there as a mid-line supervisor. This isn't time for you to get promoted, get your stripes in, and be retired on-duty. Listen, you gave

that up. When it comes down to being a supervisor, it is no longer about you.

John B.: Nope. It's no longer about you.

Floyd W.: Exactly. You said that earlier and that's so important. It's about being that servant leader.

John B.: The other thing I want to say, Floyd—what we get confused with and we talk about these concepts of that open-door policy and being open to people and dealing with the problems of your people before they become a problem. We talk about it all the time, and the problem with that whole concept as we look at that from a supervisor standpoint—supervisors have to realize they're not in the happiness business. Okay? We have a lot of supervisors out there trying to make their people happy. That's not their job. Their job is to make them safe. Their job is to provide them with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform at the highest levels in this profession. That means physically, mentally, tactically—all of the things that they're supposed to be doing to make sure that they're the best of the best and they get to go home at the end of the day.

We get confused sometimes that we feel that we cannot have a friendship or we'll destroy a friendship if we step too deep into somebody's personal problems. Well, you lose that right, like we said before, the minute you became a supervisor. You're not supposed to be their best friend. You're supposed to make sure that they go home every day, and there's a significant difference between the two. You can be friendly, but your main role is to make sure that that person does the best they can, gets the support they need, and gets to go home every day. Hopefully, at the end of the day, as we say—one of the concepts I like with you, Floyd, is to retire. When they retired, they get to collect that mailbox money. Right?

Floyd W.: Exactly.

John B.: Yep. That's the big thing.

Floyd W.: Yeah. I think that when you look at it, this right now, wellness, it's really a boilerplate issue that's taking place right now. However, the key is where do you get to affect officers? That's at that mid-level leadership—

John B.: One hundred percent.

Floyd W.: —that direct-leadership level. The major impact starts at that location. When you talk about—in the military, you always talk about the infantry is the backbone of the military. Listen, when you talk about law enforcement across the country, it is incumbent that your mid-level leadership, they right there have to put their hands on the folks that are working out there, protect them, and help them to protect those. They are the backbone of agencies across country.

John B.: Also, Floyd, it's important understand that if we don't address this stigma, if supervisors don't openly address the stigma and be transparent and be honest with their people, if we don't address the stigma, it creates more stress. We know stress kills. So, if we don't address the stigma, we create more stress. More stress creates more issues, more deviance, more dysfunction. That's how we get up to a point where officers get to a level of what we call helplessness. Once they achieve that level where they feel like they're helpless, that there's nothing that they can do to solve the problems that they've got themselves into, that's where we see some, not all, but some officers choose the route of suicide. That's something that we have to be conscious of.

So, even though suicide's the outcome of what I consider to be—an outcome of a lack of really good wellness inside an agency, at the end of the day, we need to focus on the whole person, the whole wellness person, top to bottom, chief to the academy, academy backup, and even into retirement. It's that mid-line supervisor, the cog in the wheel that every day is in the field with these people who are responsible for making sure that, again, the supervisor has to take care of themselves, but they're taking care of their people. Because if they don't take care of their people—it's like preventative maintenance on their cars or preventative maintenance on their radios, if they're not doing that preventative maintenance every single day to make sure these people are operating at the highest levels, we have a problem. Things break.

Floyd W.: Yeah. John, you said one other thing that I think is extremely important because you and I have had some very detailed conversations for ourselves, as far as our mental health and the mental health of the people to work on our teams, but one of the things you said that I think is extremely important is that supervisors need to also look out for other supervisors. Even your chain of command—we have to also look out and be able to communicate. So, we have to have that environment that allows for that culture to prevail, to be able to speak with people, to see and check on our comrades, that's for sure.

John B.: Again, that environment has to be created. Sometimes it's as easy as the supervisor themselves be the first person on the line to say, "Hey, listen, I'm going to voluntarily go seek some counseling." I don't have to explain what I'm dealing with. But seeing that supervisor go and take it upon themselves to develop those coping mechanisms they need, that's huge. That's leadership by example, right?

Floyd W.: Right, exactly.

John B.: That's stepping out in front of it, showing people that, "Hey, listen, I'm not afraid of this. I understand what's happening to me. I want to make sure that it doesn't take me. I want it to be better than this." That is so important.

Floyd W.: Yeah. You and I can say from traveling across the country, we have run into those leaders at very high levels that have come forth, and because they did that and because they shared that with their subordinates and their organization, it just cleared the way for others to say, "Hey, listen, it's okay for me to go in and get a maintenance check on myself to take care of a few things."

John B.: Yes. The interesting thing is, too, what a mid-level supervisor should be doing every day is—I would suggest that everybody listening to this podcast, if you're a mid-level supervisor, you go back and you tell your people, "I got you. You can come to me." Make sure that's known. Be transparent, be upfront, understand the policies and procedures within your agency. So, if somebody does ask for help, you have an answer. Don't just say, "I'll get back to you on that."

Number one, you have to have a conversation with your troops. Let them know that you're going to be there. You have to immerse yourself in the things that you have at your disposal, the programs, whether it be EAP or maybe it's just a helpline or a chaplaincy program that you can give them. Then, also, continually go back and go back and go back and go back and check on your people in a constant basis. That's how we create that environment in which we all become well versus all become deviance and dysfunctional. So, that's very important. Again, that saying like you said before is important, it applies to supervisor's supervisor just as much as we're talking about that mid-level supervisor as well.

Floyd W.: Well, John, the bottom line here is we have to smash the stigma and we can do it state by state, agency by agency. That's something that we have to deal with for the betterment of our officers, for the betterment of their family, and for the betterment of our community. I want to thank John Bouthillette for taking time to speak with me today. I also want to

encourage our listeners to visit the SAFLEO website, that is S-A-F-L-E-O.org, for more information on this topic and other officer safety and wellness topics. Stay healthy 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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