



Warning Signs: How to Recognize Burnout

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- Michon M.: Hello, I'm Michon Morrow with the National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers Program. Thank you for joining me for this SAFLEO Sessions Podcast. I'm joined today by Lori Luhnnow, retired chief of police with the Santa Barbara Police Department. Lori spent her career being a proponent of officer wellness, where she fully embraced the culture of supporting and caring and just refining the techniques of observation and how we are interacting with our officers, looking for the stresses, the red flags that we may see, and what we should be looking for, and recognizing that somebody is in need of our help. And we're just really thankful to have you here today and learn from your experiences and have you share your thoughts with us.
- Lori L.: Thank you for having me, Michon. This is definitely an important topic, and I'm happy to be here and will openly share what I can to help our profession and ensure that we remain safe and get people to help that they need.
- Michon M.: Well, let's get started. We know that right now in law enforcement that we're seeing increased stress levels from all of the pressures and some of the negative conversations that are evolving around law enforcement

today. And so, we know that our officers and our staff are in a higher need right now of just leaders being responsive and recognizing when they're struggling. So, let's just get right to it and talk about—what should we be looking for? What are the red flags of stress that is building within our officers and in our organizations?

Lori L.: Absolutely. I think right now we have to assume our officers are stressed. We know it's a profession that puts them at risk on a daily basis. They're always in danger, and this environment is super unstable and unpredictable for them. And now they have additional stressors where the community is questioning more of what they do, bringing in new expectations. We see that with legislation that's changing every day, reporting that's being mandated, as well as oversight. So, when we look at what is stress, all those stressors come in, and depending on where they personally are with how they carry stress, it's going to be there. So, we have to assume they've got it. What can we do to ensure that they're going to be well and be able to move through it?

Michon M.: Yeah, all really great points. And when you talk about those outside influences and what we can do as leaders to maybe help insulate or build resiliency in them so they can respond and bounce back and deal with that stress—so when we talk about the stress, that we know that they're carrying on a day-to-day basis, what do you think as leaders that we should be looking for specifically?

Lori L.: I think the biggest thing we should be looking for is a change in someone's behavior. And clearly, we as chiefs or upper administration may not have the interaction with our officers as much as our line-level employees do. But that's why it's important for us to create a culture that people notice changes and they act on them and they don't sit back idly. In fact, if somebody is super grouchy, nonresponsive, and seems to be shut off from interacting with the team, or they're showing up late, they look more disheveled—those are all clear signs that they're not their best selves. So, we need to stop and ask them, ask those questions.

How is their performance as an officer? And that's mostly with the supervisors or management level to, I think, dig through some of those performance issues, but it's a clear sign that they're not really on the ball and ready for their game. And I say game because I view our work and our profession as almost that, that we need to perform. We need to be at our top physical condition. So, we need to recognize that our officers are carrying too much and do what we can as an organization to minimize that.

Michon M.: I absolutely want to dig into what that looks like—of what we can do for them. But you said a couple of things that I want to hit on, specifically our culture. And I'm curious to your thoughts—in days gone by and in the past, do you think if I came into work and I was lethargic and I just didn't look like I was on my A game, like typical, did we really empower the supervisors, those first-line leadership sergeants to engage me in conversation? Or did we just think, "Ah, she had a bad day. She'll get over it?"

Lori L.: I think that's exactly the point. I think we need to proactively empower our people and teach them that we need to take the time to ask, "Is it just that somebody is tired because they had a long shift, or is it something else?" We have no idea what they're going through outside of work. We may know what kind of day they had at work, but you won't know what is there unless you engage them in conversation and try to pull it out. And it's kind of ironic that we teach our employees to interact with victims on a compassionate level, to be able to ascertain what tragedies have occurred to them, but we don't take the time to really do the same with our peers and those sitting next to us when we know that they're a little disconnected.

Michon M.: Yeah, I agree. And it kind of just begs the next question of, "Why is that?"

Lori L.: I don't know. I have an example where I had one of my captains telling me about somebody's behavior and how, "Oh, I don't know what's going on with them. They're acting really closed off, and they're negative." And my response back to that captain is, "Well, did you ask them?" And they felt that it wasn't their place. And ironically, I ran into that officer later that day and tried to say hi, and the officer kept walking, and I followed that officer and ended up engaging him in a 45-minute conversation where I found out exactly what was going on. And I shared a resource with him. He was open to it, and I still have the text messages because it's what we try to do every single day.

He texted me back that I have helped change his entire family life. He was just in a bad place, super frustrated. And by the time he got to work, he felt burnt out and wasn't able to deal with all the multitude of issues that we deal with and the additional work stressors. And he fortunately found his way, but had I not done that—I regret we don't do it more frequently. I don't know why that was such an anomaly.

Michon M.: Yeah, that's a really good question of why that's such an anomaly. And I think that it kind of shows that there are certainly areas that we need to evolve in our leadership skills and what we're teaching of how we bring

up the concept of leadership and what that looks like. And you had mentioned the individual that we lead. And I think it's a really important point that we really do lead the whole of the person, not just the officer that comes to work and serves nobly on behalf of our organizations and within the community, but everything that they bring to the table—their home life, the stresses that they're experiencing within their family, the personal issues. And I think we're just past the day where we can just say, "That's none of my business," that we have to care about everything of who they are. And if we don't take the time to know them, how would we? How would we know that there was a change in their behavior, that their stress level is increasing?

Lori L.: You're exactly correct. You know how hard it is. You're still active. And officer positions are open, there's more and more being placed on our officers. They are our most valuable resource. And it's just one of those things that sometimes gets lost, I think, because we are so busy ourselves. I know all of our supervisors, our managers, our command staff—everybody is doing more with less and probably reaching that compassion fatigue and burnout themselves. So, it's hard to continue to give when you yourself are depleted and feel like you can't give anymore.

Michon M.: Yeah. You mentioned compassion fatigue—and for our listeners, I want to just kind of dig into that a little bit more and what that looks like for us as law enforcement. Lori, can you kind of expand upon that?

Lori L.: Well, compassion fatigue, for me—I think we see, at least from my perspective, that's that stress from caring for others. It's that extreme burnout that we feel and our inability to recharge. And I know physiologically it's when our sympathetic nervous system is being overloaded and we have some physiological effects that go with that. So, we don't sleep, we get irritable, we might get more aches and pains and feel those more than we ever have. And we kind of get this indifference that exists around us, and it creates this, whether real or a perception—I think a perception of cynicism, negativity, people seem withdrawn. But the reality is, is we're just so tapped out physically and emotionally, we just can't give anymore.

Michon M.: Yeah. And it's interesting because I think the studies right now are saying that that is happening more sooner in our careers than it did in the past. I recently was reviewing some work that had come out that said that we start experiencing that as soon as a year to a year and a half within our career. Just the calls for service that we're dealing with and the life tragedies that we're trying to help others with while we still are carrying the weight of our own life, that just seemingly gets more

and more complicated as we evolve. And I think that you made another really good point when we talk about leadership and leaders and that we also are really busy and need support. So, I'm curious of what you would suggest to the leaders out there listening, have—while they're watching and looking for stressors and how they can support their officers, how do they support themselves? Who do they go to?

Lori L.: This is one that I can't say I was the best role model of success, because I am challenged with taking care of myself every single day. But I know as a chief, I did reach out and use some psychological resources and it may have taken some courage for me to do it. And I was amazed at how significant that was in my life because it showed me a perspective that I wasn't used to seeing. But I think the greatest blessing for me was having understanding peers because, you know, when you're in the upper ranks, it's hard to find people that you can talk with and trust with some of your personal baggage or weaknesses. And we have a tendency to not want to bring other people down. So, finding those people that you trust around you that you can have that open communication and they help build you up I think is the first step.

Michon M.: Yeah. And that is a great first step of just building those relationships and knowing that—who you can turn to for that support. And I guess I'm curious, and I so appreciate that you were willing to share today and with our listeners that you yourself reached out to psychological services, using your words, just to address the issues that you were working with. Did you share that? And maybe that's the—going beyond what I should ask you today, but I'm curious. In a leadership perspective, do we share that? Should we role model and let others observe that we're a part of this and that we're going through similar issues and that we're willing to seek assistance?

Lori L.: Great point, Michon. You're absolutely correct. We need to be role models, and we need to share what we're comfortable with. I'm going to share some more. I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer, and I was at a point where I needed to take some time off and deal with my illness. And I asked myself that question, "Is this something I just take time off to deal with, or do I share it, knowing that there will be more questions and it's probably going to be spread throughout my large organization?" And I thought about it. We, as leaders, work so hard to develop the people below us, and we want to see them rise up, and we're all going to have our weak moments, and that's their opportunity to step up and continue to keep the organization strong.

So, I consciously shared that and was comfortable doing it. But that story that I told you earlier about my interaction with an officer, I shared

with him the counseling I received. And that's when he said, "If there's an opportunity for me to use that resource, I would love to do that." And I made it happen for him because I had the connection to do it and made it easy. And if I didn't, I don't think if I made myself vulnerable to share that, it probably wouldn't have been as successful.

Michon M.: Yeah. That's so powerful. And in the past, we've talked about courageous vulnerability—just being willing to put ourselves out there and expose ourselves to others, watching and learning and observing from us. But I think that it can be such a powerful shift in our culture when we have leaders that are normalizing the conversation of, "We have stress, I have stress," and how we go about dealing with it so we can be successful and healthy. Not just at work, responding to calls for service and working within their community, but when we go home, because we know that if we don't take care of that stress, that it absolutely follows our officers home and into their home life. And I guess I want to talk about that a little bit of how we address that component, the stress that this profession causes and how it can affect an officer's home life.

Lori L.: We need to assume that our officers' home lives are being affected. And I know over this last year and a half, especially with COVID, more and more officers were coming in with levels of stress that work put them over the top. And us, as administrators, need to try to work with creating that space for them to practice self-care. And we're in this position right now where we're lacking staffing and there's this grind to push more people out in overtime status. And that all creates this undesirable situation where they're not getting a break. So as much as we can create some space for A, them to get some help. But also to get the self-care they need. And part of that, I think, is their ability to create their environment at home with their loved ones where they can literally be off duty. And we're awful about calling people on their days off or expecting more out of them. And we have to respect that family connection and work to get them that vacation and ensure that their positive attitude is something that's going to be carried through their work and personal life.

Michon M.: Yeah, practicing self-care. That's not something that we're great at. And I think it's a skill that we need to focus on in law enforcement. We train so much on really important topics, like defensive tactics, out at the range with our firearms, how to do a detailed, thorough investigation with a logical conclusion. But we don't do a good job of teaching them what actually self-care looks like. I'm curious, because you've talked about working in a department that really embraced wellness as a part of their culture. And so, from your experiences, what do you think is

successful in how we build this in, and this, I guess, training to teach them how to care for themselves and then, therefore, their families?

Lori L.: Absolutely. I think it starts with day one with our new employees, and specifically with my prior department—there was that day when our officers got out of their academy training before they started their field training with the organization where there was a spouse day, and there was a wellness panel. And the resources were laid out and shared. And there's a social media page that they were invited to be a part of just for the family. And those connections were made on the peer level, spouses-to-spouses, and even peer-to-peer officers that created that—I think that family and friend network had positive impacts. It also strengthened the understanding for all of our peer support resources and communication that's available to ensure that they get the help they need, or the resources are there to help with difficult situations.

But I also agree—one of the great things we had when I was in San Diego was this robust chaplain program. And a couple of chaplains in particular were so integrated with the teams. They would go out on ride-alongs and truly became members of the team. And I had open dialogue with them in regards to who may be needing some extra resources based on my perceptions or even their perceptions. So, I would have chaplains come to me and say, "I'm not going to say anything confidential, but watch this officer," or, "If you can give them the time they need, they really need to work on some things." So, it was this culture that supported the wholeness of being well.

Michon M.: You mentioned the chaplain program and peer support, and I want to talk just a little bit more about that. First of all, I absolutely applaud that you talked about bringing this in kind of from day one with your new officers when they're in the academy and allowing their spouses, their families to come in and learn and be a part of that process of what it's going to look like and the experiences and resources that are going to be available to them. Because I think I mentioned earlier that we lead the whole of the person, and we recognize that this is a stressful profession and they take that stress home. So, we have a responsibility there, and I think that you hit home on that by providing those resources for the families and how they can reach out for help when they see that there are stressors and needs that they need addressed. The chaplain program and the peer support—can you talk to me a little bit more and for our listeners of what that looked like and how that evolved, like any policies, procedures, training that was kind of encompassed with those resources?

Lori L.:

Yes. I know San Diego County has a regional approach to most things, which has been a strength, I think, of the region because those policies are all consistent. And there is a strict hiring program, I should say, for the chaplains—but also, this sense of responsibility. When I said hired, it's a free job. They're not getting paid. They're volunteers, but they get brought in and they are given areas of responsibility, teams of responsibility, and they're proactive. And their goal is to integrate themselves to be a part of those divisions, to offer what support they have. I know the training is very structured, and I apologize—I don't know how long the training is, but it's one of those that we take that position seriously. And it's embedded underneath the formal structure of the wellness unit, so there's strict guidelines. Unfortunately, there's been occasions where we have had to let chaplains go that didn't fit the mission of consistency. And that's a part of managing that, I think, that very valuable resource to ensure that it is continuing to be positive for each of our employees.

In addition, peer support is one of those that has to be a voluntary position where people are committed to doing what they can for those around them, and they are automatically sent out on critical incidents. And I have had the opportunities to see peer support work at a couple of different agencies. And again, it might be a little easier in bigger agencies. But when you have a dedicated peer support team that is available 24/7 to respond to critical incidents and you mandate they respond to certain incidents like officer-involved shootings, you know that those needs are being met. So, there's consistency with training and expectations, that these are the swim lanes, if you will, that they will fulfill for the organization and the individuals.

And our peer support officers are the ones that often connect with the family. They're assigned with family members when there may be an injury or a situation where an employee is significantly in need of some assistance. So it's, I want to say a safe resource—that peer level is one that removes the fear of maybe confidentiality in a way that may be held against an officer when that person is connected to an employee that really, really needs support around them. So, they embrace them and are there just to link them to the resources and anything when they need it.

Michon M.:

I want to just ask a question, because I think that this comes up in our officers' minds of—when interacting with the chaplain program or the peer support program, certainly, if they're experiencing stressors or maybe as a supervisor, as a leader, I'm interacting with the officer and I recognize that. And then together, we make an agreement that the officer's going to go voluntarily visit peer support or the chaplain, or

potentially the other resources that are available. And maybe it's an EAP, an employee assistance program, but where's the line? Because I think that this is where some of the stigma still lies is I voluntarily go, or in cases where maybe those stresses have really leaked into my ability to perform and function at the level required by my organization. So now, as a leader, I have to take it a step further and potentially force or mandate. What do you think that looks like and how do we best address that as leaders?

Lori L.: Well, I think the point you're making is—this is why we need to be proactive. This is why we need to offer as much as we can when people can recognize needs themselves early on and proactively get the help. But we put our officers in situations where we need to know that they're going to be safe. And if they are unable to function, to protect themselves, or to handle—we put them in 4,000 pound vehicles and give them firearms to go out into the community and expect them to do a job. And unfortunately, if it's at a point where their safety or the community's safety is compromised, that's where we have to do something. In fact, it's a huge liability if we don't. And I think it's okay to talk about that, and that's the point that we need that interaction early on. So, we can have those discussions to say, "Hey, I really need to make sure you are staying well and safe so I don't get put in a position to take you away from doing this job because you need to get help."

Michon M.: Right. And I think—in furthering that, I think it's really imperative as leaders that when we're having this conversation, that when we're at this point, that we're potentially going to require that visit, that maybe the self-regulation or we just missed opportunities to step in before it got to that point, that this is about supporting them, that this is about providing them the resources to regain their footing and get back to a point where they're again in service and out with their community and doing the job that they love. That the intention—and I think that this is some of that fear base of why we get a little bit of pushback still is we just fear that it could potentially cause a stigma where you're no longer able to do the job.

And I think that we need to make sure in our conversations, as we normalize this, that we understand that we're just evolving past that, and we recognize that we hire human beings and that stress affects us. And sometimes, we just need that time out and that we're going to provide that and that safe landing to get the help they need, whether it's visiting with a chaplain, it's peer support, it's with a mental health clinician potentially tied to the organization, but that we're going to

welcome them back. And it doesn't change any opinions or perspectives or how they can advance in their career after such visit.

Lori L.: So, Michon, you're right. I, in my last year, had three officers actually step up at one point and say, "I'm not well, I need to get help." And two out of the three made it back to work. One recognized that there were long-term issues that, that came from a military career that he needed to deal with and opted out of the profession. But the fact that they stepped up is something that I have never seen in my career, 32 years. And for me, it's exciting to see the culture change and the fact that people came forward, sharing a weakness with the administration, felt the support, got the help they needed, and came back to work has made the organization that much stronger. And I think they serve as role models to those around them.

Michon M.: Yes. That is such a testament to the leadership that you provided your organization, that that word spread, that there is support in the leadership, that you can come forward. And it's okay to say, "I'm not okay. I'm not okay today, and I need help," and know that the department's really going to wrap their arms around them, provide them the resources, and allow them the opportunity to get better, feel better, and come back and still be successful. And I hope that that is just the goal of all of the organizations, law enforcement in our country, because we really need to care. We need to care about those that are serving within our organizations and interacting with our community members every single day. And just thank you for sharing that. That really means something. I wanted—just earlier when we were talking, you mentioned the wellness unit, and I'm really intrigued by this. So, tell me more about this. Did you have specific officers assigned where they were just focusing on wellness?

Lori L.: So, I again came from a large agency where we had the opportunity to do that. And one of my mentors created a wellness unit that had full time—two full-time sergeants, and a full-time civilian that were there. And they had open hours for people to walk in to ask about resources. But I think more importantly, they were proactive in getting out and sharing resources. They were the ones that were putting on those sessions with police recruits for the spouses, etc. So, yes, it's a very robust, full-time wellness unit. And then when I went to Santa Barbara, we created—we call it the wellness unit, but it's collateral duty for a sergeant and a couple officers who also work in an administrative capacity. But the minute we as leaders allocate resources and responsibility, amazing things happen. And people almost instinctively reach out and ask the questions and get the help. And these people

become so compassionate knowing that they have the freedom to get their peers the help. It's been a phenomenal thing to see grow.

Michon M.: So, the takeaway here is you just have to do something. It can be small steps in the right direction. If you have the ability, it could be a large-scale unit, but doing nothing certainly isn't going to be acceptable, not when we need to support our officers.

Lori L.: You're right. I think it starts with giving people responsibility and freedom to do it as a part of their job because either they are tasked, "I've got to accomplish this goal or write this report," but you know what? There's nothing more important than helping our officers. And I should say, not just officers, our professional staff as well when they need it.

Michon M.: Absolutely. Yeah, I completely agree. And we do need to recognize that there are others in our organization, our professional staff that see and experience vicarious trauma, just like we do—our evidence technicians and our property and evidence units, our dispatchers answering those calls, our records professionals that are transcribing some of just the horrific interviews that our officers are out there doing on a daily basis with those who have experienced tragedy. So, you are right. And very good to point out that we are an organization as a whole, and that's all of our staff who need these services to be able to function and have a long, happy career where they can move to retirement and not have some of those impacts that can carry with us and affect our health after a long-term exposure to stress.

Lori L.: You're absolutely correct. And I like to use that term, not just surviving, but thriving. We need to make sure our employees thrive throughout their career and especially retirement.

Michon M.: Perfect. And looking back on our conversation today, I just think that there's some really solid points that I want to re-emphasize. And first and foremost is, as leaders, we just really need to spend the time and commit to understanding and knowing all that we can about our officers, the staff members that we work with day in and day out. Because if we don't, we're just going to miss those changes in their behavior and their performance, physical signs of stress, and we're going to miss opportunities to step in and step in when it may matter the most to be able to provide them resources before it gets to a point where it's really going to potentially have a negative impact on their work performance and potentially with their home life. And I just think that that's just a really big takeaway for us in being able to recognize those signs and symptoms of stress that they're experiencing.

Lori L.: Absolutely. And I like to think we need to be strategic and resilient in our approach to it, intentional in our actions and our communication, or we're not going to get through this together. But I think there's nothing more noble than self-care and caring for families that really help us survive this career.

Michon M.: You said it best—that we want to make sure that they don't just survive the career, that they thrive and have a happy, healthy retirement and their families as well. And so, providing those supports that we can internally within our organization and extending, allowing those opportunities to the families as well, is how we can be a part, as leaders, in making sure that they are thriving.

Lori L.: Absolutely.

Michon M.: Lori, I really want to thank you for taking the time to speak with me today on this very important topic. I encourage our listeners to visit SAFLEO website at safleo.org for more information on this topic and other officer safety and wellness topics. Again, that is S-A-F-L-E-O.org. Everyone listening today, until later—stay safe, stay well, and stay healthy.

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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