



Finding Yourself Again: Stop Suffering in Silence

- 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. This podcast is not meant to take the place of advice from a medical professional. If you or someone you know is experiencing a crisis, please call the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988, or text the word “blue” to 741741 to reach the law enforcement officers’ personal crisis text line. 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.
- Sonia Q.: Hello everyone. I’m Sonia Quiñones with the National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers, or SAFLEO, Program and host for this SAFLEO Sessions Podcast. I recently retired as a chief of police with the Hallandale Beach Police Department down in sunny south Florida. And I’m super excited to be here with you today. I am joined by our guest, Lieutenant Jakisha Jones with the Arlington, Texas, Police Department. Jakisha, thank you so much for joining us today.
- Jakisha J.: Thank you, Sonia, for having me on. I’m really humbled and excited to be on for this experience.
- Sonia Q.: Yeah, we’re super excited to have you, and I can tell you, this is a very serious conversation we’re going to have today. In law enforcement we face many challenges. Usually, it’s how we respond to those challenges, not necessarily how we react to the challenges, but one of the worst things that we could ever imagine, incidents that we may face, is the death of an officer. And today, Jakisha, we would like to hear from you for you to share your experience and your challenges involving the in-the-line-of-duty death of one of your

fellow officers. So Jakisha, please take us back to how you handled that.

Jakisha J.:

Absolutely. And I appreciate you saying that. A lot of times, we, especially in the profession, or maybe even people on the outside, often view the calls for service, the physical things that we go through, as the most challenging things, but oftentimes it can just be the mental barricades and blocks that we have in overcoming things personally sometimes. So, I appreciate you saying that. In particular, this involves an experience that I had just like many other officers at my agency and across the world. Anytime you hear about or personally are at an agency where one of your coworkers, your family members, dies in the line of duty, there's mixed emotions, there's different responses, different conversations, different processes that take place.

For this one in particular, this dealt with an officer that we lost who'd only been on the force for about ten days, and she unfortunately had her end of watch on December 28, 2010. At the time, I had been an officer and supervisor, well, an officer for about, I would say, about six years almost. And I just remember that day very vividly now more so in a way that I can remember it and have positive reflection from it and think about the relationships with her family and some other people that I've gained. But the day itself will always be imprinted in my mind.

December 28, 2010, I'd gotten off from working a midnight shift. I remember being tired, being exhausted, getting home like many midnight officers would do, pulling those blackout curtains, showering, getting ready for bed, and going to bed finally. I remember maybe a couple hours into sleeping that I received numerous phone calls. One in particular just woke me up because the phone just kept vibrating, ringing, vibrating, ringing. When I finally woke up, I realized that I'd missed about 46 calls, and I couldn't understand initially waking up, "How on earth did I miss 46 calls?" I started looking at the names and the numbers of the calls that I was missing—my mom, some of my peers that were in my class, a couple officers that worked at the district that I worked at.

So, as I start calling people back, the first phrase that I start to hear is, "Are you okay?" Or, "Oh my, I'm so glad you're okay." And as I started with each call, different layers of the accounts of what had occurred that day started unfolding. By the time I got to one of my coworkers is when I found out that one of our officers, a young female officer, had been shot and killed in the line of duty. I

remember calling my mom as I was jumping up to throw on clothes so that I could head in on my off time to figure out what was going on, see what services I could offer. I was on the honor guard unit at that time, so quite naturally, we were going to be activated to assist with whatever the needs of the department and the family were.

And I remember hearing the anxiety in my mom's voice when I finally answered her callback to let her know that I was okay. I remember getting to the police station, one of our police stations, and seeing different officers that were in the station from different agencies. Some were crisis intervention teams; some were officers in uniform and plain clothes. And it was just a really somber time, somber moment. Officers were crying, officers were standing in corners looking down at their feet. You had officers that were just in that moment trying to make sense of what had just occurred. And it wasn't until I saw certain coworkers that I was with when they confirmed with me of what had actually occurred and the embrace that I received that I too broke down from the news of hearing that one of our peers had been killed.

She was so new that many people didn't recognize that it was not me. We had very similar names. We were both female, both black female officers, both worked the same side of town. And it just became an instance where a lot of the officers that were more senior just were not sure. Definitely with her being so new, again, only ten days on the street, that there was a little miscommunication and understanding of who actually was involved in that critical incident.

I remember sitting for the debriefing of what had occurred and just every word was piercing. Every word was difficult to hear. Every word was just placing our mindset back in, "What were those last moments for her like before she was killed?" And what we were basically informed was that the officer responded to a domestic disturbance that had been timed out for a couple of hours. I think the way that it read was more so like it was a report of an assault. The officer responded, parked, went upstairs. As she started walking upstairs, she was followed by a gentleman at the time perhaps not recognized as being a participant or subject of the previous offense that had occurred, the 9-1-1 call that had occurred. By the time she gets to the door, gets inside to talk to the person that called 9-1-1, the complainant, that subject entered the apartment in with her, and that's when everything really just fell from there. She, in the course of going in the door, immediately started hearing the arguments between the complainant that was inside of the apartment and the subject that ultimately came into the apartment with our officer. We

were given reason and information to believe that as the argument ensued, our officer attempted to intervene where the subject that entered immediately pulled a weapon and shot our officer at close range. And it ended up being a fatal wound.

She was able to push a young child who was inside of the location out of the location. The subject shoots our officer fatally, then proceeds to chase the complainant that was inside of the apartment to a restroom where she had locked herself in and ultimately killed her as well. And then came back out, and from the accounts that we received, the subject had run out of bullets. So, he took the gun of our officer, killed himself.

So just hearing that information, hearing that story, definitely was one that hit me in such a way that I didn't realize initially. And I think that was because I started immediately going into more of a service mode: "Who can I help? What's needed? Who do I need to contact? What is our honor guard unit going to do? What is our role? Where can I be of need at this point?" I did have a moment initially, but I initially started going into more of a reactive/proactive role of just figuring out what the need was.

I do remember the family being notified and the devastation of that when the officers went to the residence of the officer's mom and just hearing the different accounts from officers that had trained with her. I think, for me, it took a minute to really just embrace what had just occurred. But again, as we do, law enforcement officers, the training and the understanding that you get to work through critical incidents like that kicks in, and you keep moving.

We had the funeral that took place. Very difficult. I remember being on the honor guard unit, being a sergeant in the unit over the colors team at that time and standing and watching the procession come in and then watching the family come and then our team ultimately carrying her casket to the grave side and performing our duties and then moving forward.

So even though that was one of the most honorable ways to reverence our sister that had fallen, our sister in blue, it still was one of those things where you're not really grieving yet because you're serving.

Sonia Q.:

So Jakisha, let me ask you, there's a lot of feelings that are going on, and we're the protectors, right? We're the protectors. We take care of our families, of our homes, of our communities, but who

takes care of us, right? We've learned that self-care is not selfish. It's sacred.

And at what point, as you're going through all of this, did you say, "Hey, maybe it's time to seek some help"? Because you mentioned that you were there and you reverted right back to that training where you were helping everybody what needed to get done here and now. But at what point—what was that tipping point where you say, "I could use some help?"

Jakisha J.:

I think for me having grown up in a life-of-service family and a life of service, I think for me there were some subtle things that started becoming great. I wasn't sleeping. Now, I'm a college student at the time, and still am, pursuing different degrees and certifications. So, it's not necessarily uncommon to stay up late, but I wasn't sleeping for days at a time. I remember just constantly replaying what occurred in my head. Couldn't find positions to get comfortable in, to even close my eyes to sleep.

I remember different coworkers and family members making comment. It wasn't anything that was just too extreme, but it would be smaller stuff like, I'm typically an extroverted extrovert, as they say, or I'm typically always talkative or always positive and going around people and just trying to get people to talk and really just enjoy their day. And I would come in and I would be quiet. I wouldn't have as much to say. I was withdrawn socially. And I think it became a thing for me where I tried to force myself to do the things that I would normally do.

I actually started eating a lot more, which was totally opposite of what I would normally do. I remember looking at a picture one day and not even recognizing that it was me in the photo from having gained weight from just really, I guess, subconsciously just eating as a coping mechanism, which wasn't healthy. And those were the tipping points for me. I think my lack of sleep for long periods of time at a time, different close people hinting at stuff but me not really recognizing it as being an issue until I did, and then the weight gain.

Sonia Q.:

And we know, right? It's very easy to turn to something else, unhealthy coping skills, to try to drown out everything else, to try to suppress, to try to mask those feelings. So, what were some of the healthy coping skills that you took on?

Jakisha J.:

So, one of the things that I appreciated, and I'm glad you asked that, was the free services that my department offered. We've always had some type of wellness component or mental health component where we could access professionals that we needed. So, at the time, we had the ability to make contact to licensed therapists or counselors, and we could go through various sessions that were free.

And when I finally did go, it literally was like a breath of fresh air for me. I thought it was going to be uncomfortable because I thought, "Okay, here I am. I'm a supervisor. I'm responsible for all these people. I should know how to cope. I should know how to respond. This should not be something that I'm experiencing because I know better."

And I found myself even that first day leaving with a lighter load because I felt like I was able to share my experience in a safe place. And even that little bit of what I was able to discuss helped me tremendously realize that, "This is bigger than what you thought it was. This is bigger than you. And it's okay that you are seeking help to address how you're feeling and how you're responding."

Sonia Q.:

And ultimately, right, it's okay not to be okay. And I learned many years ago, to cry is to be human. And instead of internalizing those concerns, instead of internalizing and suppressing, it's important that we get that off our chest, if you will.

So Jakisha, I want to know, and I want our listeners to know as well: How did you get started in seeking a counselor? And can you walk us through how that felt like initially? Some people are concerned. They don't know what's involved when you see a therapist, a counselor. Can you describe that atmosphere, and how did you get started in there?

Jakisha J.:

Absolutely. So, I think from even just the moment of being on that call, what I appreciated that was made available to us was what was known at the time as the Critical Incident Stress Management team or CISM. We now call it Peer Support Team. But at the time, they had officers from another local agency that responded to be available to us. And what I appreciated was their literature was out and our literature was out, and I took it, and at first, I was like, "I appreciate them giving the information, but I don't know about this." But when I started observing all of those unhealthy ways that I was coping, as we talked about earlier, I went ahead and just picked it up.

I think part of it had to do with just wanting some practical solutions or concepts or ways that I could apply to my daily life to try to get to some understanding of resolve on how I was feeling and how I was responding to it. So, I literally just called the number on the brochure that was in our community room where we met at the time. And if I'm honest, I hung up twice, and I'm laughing now because it's funny to me that I was hanging up. It's almost like you're calling for a first date or something when you're younger, and you call and you hang up. But that third time I called when they answered, and she said, "Hey, my name is such and such. Are you calling for . . . ?" And she gave a couple of different options. And I just said, "I'm a little hesitant; I'm with law enforcement, and I'm calling for this."

And she immediately went into third gear. She was like, "You know what? I appreciate you calling." She first congratulated me, if you will, for calling. And she told me how brave I was for calling. And she said, "Let me get you with somebody that can further help you." So that eased me at first. She didn't make me feel like a number. She didn't make me feel like I was bothering her that I called. She was actually pretty excited for me, which made me excited, like, "Okay, this isn't that bad. This isn't somber. It isn't weird."

And so, when one of the professionals answered the phone, they didn't ask me a bunch of specific questions about me. They just basically asked what was closest to me to meet and what day could I come in. Now, they did encourage me for days that were pretty close to the day that we were talking. And I think maybe they understood that if I waited too long, I may talk myself out of coming. I literally went about three blocks from my house. It just so happened that they had a licensed professional counselor that I could see blocks away from my neighborhood.

And I went in and my first hour was up, and I still wanted to talk, and she probably would've continued letting me talk. However, the time was up and someone else was coming in. But what I appreciated was that they also asked me questions: Did I have a preference of male or female? Did I have a preference of something with religious affiliation or not? Or did I just want to speak to someone that was a counselor not affiliated with a specific religion? So they really made it to where it was catered to me, which helped also. It made me feel like that it was specific to me, even though it's a service that's provided to so many.

Sonia Q.: But ultimately, it is specific to Jakisha in this particular point. And I love the fact that they were very welcoming because it is brave. It takes great strength to seek help, taking that first initial step, that leap of faith. Leap and the net will appear, right? Take that first step and the net will appear.

Jakisha J.: Absolutely.

Sonia Q.: Now, how did the other people react to you getting some help, and how did they learn that you were getting some help?

Jakisha J.: Initially, I didn't want to say anything, which is so awkward because at the time, including now, I'm very heavily involved in my church. And even at work I'm in a capacity where I'm constantly encouraging people to speak their truth, to seek help if needed, to ask questions, to come to me if they ever have an issue, that I would make myself available, yet I was in a position where I was keeping myself from getting those same benefits and resources. I think for me, what helped me and what I ultimately ended up showing them was, "Hey, Sarge, where are you going?" Or, "Hey, I noticed you're leaving early." And I started sharing what I was doing. And initially, I was nervous about whether there would be some type of fallout about it or whether there would be some type of negative stigma: "Oh, Sarge is going to the doctor. Sarge is going here. Maybe this is too stressful of a job. Maybe she can't do."

But it was actually the opposite. I received a lot of verbal support from those that I did open up to at the time, and I started sharing with them what my experiences were like in the sessions. And it surprised me that it ended up getting back to so many. I didn't say that it was a secret, but I only told a few people at the time, and many of them came back and started asking, "What was it like? What was the setup process like to even get started?" And they assured me that they were going to go to use the services to talk about various things that they were experiencing also.

Sonia Q.: And what's interesting about that is I had a field training officer back in the day, and he was a SWAT member. But he was a strong believer in counseling and seeking counseling therapy to get that assistance. And he used to say, "Hey, go see a therapist." And he would talk about it openly. So that helped in my agency back in the day to start breaking that stigma. And when one person sees you, especially since you're a lieutenant, you're a supervisor, they see that you're seeking help. It's okay. Let's not wait until something catastrophic happens. Let's continue to check in on each other.

Jakisha J.: Absolutely. Even to this day—and again, that was in 2010—I’ve had other things that have occurred in my life. But I think that initial step to find more positive and sustaining coping skills is what’s helped me. So, I’ve continued going to the therapy or even just counseling sessions, even if there was not something that was wrong in particular, some specific instance had occurred. I just thought it was healthy considering the type of work that we do and the types of calls that we respond to.

I’ve had experience and background dealing with demonstrations and protests as an executive officer for our special response team. I’ve had a background working in different communities and different settings and different details. And it was one of those things where I had to come to a realization that there’s never a time where I’m not going to be exposed to something critical. As much as we do have a large contingency of our community that absolutely loves law enforcement and the services that we provide and the sacrifices that we make, they’re typically not calling when everything is going well. So even calls that we feel like we manage okay still in totality add up to adding stress to our bodies, to our minds. And I never wanted to be in a situation again where I allowed myself to get to a point where I didn’t recognize myself and I wasn’t in a position to address issues that ultimately could have caused me to be unsafe or to make decisions that were unsafe for other people.

Sonia Q.: Take the leap and that net will appear. And they were that net for you to seek that help. And what’s interesting too, right, is when you see a counselor or a therapist, it’s about making that connection. It’s not just communicating, it’s that connection, that rapport you build with someone, where you feel comfortable and you want to make sure that you continue to open up to them. So, I’m glad that it was a wonderful experience for you and that it brought you the help that you wanted and needed. Jakisha, thank you for sharing about the experience with going to the counselor and how you took that first step to seek help. What other outcomes did you gain from seeing that counselor?

Jakisha J.: I think some of the things that really stand out to me—and thank you for asking that—were that I started having better eating habits, not necessarily because we specifically took a lot of time on nutrition and eating, but it was just the acknowledgement, when asked had any of my daily habits changed—my diet, my sleep—we talked briefly about the eating, and I started paying attention to things. It literally was like an epiphany: “Hey, you’ve had to get one or two

different uniforms in this timeframe that were of a larger size. You've had to adjust different things in your life." But the positive outcome was I did change my eating. I did start back working out and lost weight.

I think another positive outcome was my being able to go back around and really just start back being that encourager to other people that I was before, that they, in turn, when I needed help acknowledged to me they noticed that I wasn't myself. So, I went back to going to the different settings, the different briefings, the different community events that I had neglected during that time. I just remember feeling like, "Finally, I'm not walking around with a mask on anymore. Finally, I'm back to being able to feel like myself again." And actually, I felt better than I did before this happened because I had the understanding that when situations occur, that not only is it okay to not be okay, but there are steps that you can take to be able to make sure that you overcome whatever the situation is.

I think that it definitely made me a better leader. I think that I wasn't able just to talk about the things that officers should do and the resources they could access, that I actually now could really give a testimony of what it was like and how it's benefited me, that I was an example, if you will, a positive outcome. My experience actually in itself was a positive result and a form of positive outcome of what the wellness and mental health sessions could actually do for you. I could continue to walk around and act like everything was okay to prove a point that you can just not get help and just try to work it out on your own and suffer in silence, if you will, or you could say, "You know what? I'm still a great officer. I'm still a great supervisor. I'm still a great sibling, a great daughter. I'm still a great person that works in the community if I go get this help that's offered out there for me and probably even better." So that's what a positive outcome was for me.

Sonia Q.:

It's important that we continue to take care of each other, right? Just taking you back a little bit to something you mentioned earlier as well—it's ultimately about that calmness that we have to maintain during the initial incident, because we have to. It's the job that we do at that moment. As you said, you got into that mode of what needs to get done, who needs to get taken care of, what's the next step? And you handle all of those things extremely well, but then when everything quiets down, you start thinking, "Should've, would've, could've." And it's about making sure that we're competent, making sure we're aware, making sure that we continue to do things for the greater good.

Jakisha J.: Right. And I think that it's so important to recognize your emotional intelligence in situations like that. It's one thing to have to respond to an incident, have your critical thinking skills on to be able to observe threats, stop threats, manage resources, allocate personnel. But it's another thing to recognize, even in those critical incidents, "What's my emotional intelligence level like right now? Am I extremely excited on the radio? Is my heart beating fast to where I'm having health issues? Am I able to effectively communicate this information?" And even if I'm able to do all those things, what's my physiological response once it stops? Am I able to sleep afterwards? Am I able to bring myself back to a normalcy state, if you will? And so I think for me, that's what makes it so important to have those coping skills and to be able to recognize it not only in yourself, but then be able to recognize it in those you're accountable to so you can refer services to them as well.

Sonia Q.: Jakisha, going back and having lived through that experience and those challenges, is there one thing you would go back and tell your earlier self to do, not to do?

Jakisha J.: Oh, wow. Such a great question. I think if there was one thing that I could say would be it takes strength to work through and endure the types of calls for service that we do. But I would say that it takes equal strength, if not greater, to speak up when you need help. I think it's a sign of grace. I think it's a sign of courage and bravery. So I would always encourage people, officers, fellow officers, to seek help. We provide help, but we have to be able to recognize when it's okay to receive help so that we can continue to be vessels of service in the community.

I remember, ultimately, one of our police associations, through a foundation that we started for our officer to, one, give scholarships to high school students that were interested in going into criminal justice, but then also, branching out and partnering with our local county safe haven to give scholarships to survivors of domestic violence because that ultimately was a domestic violence critical incident.

We were able to get information on the young girl who was pushed out of the apartment and saved by our officer that day. We ultimately were able to talk to her, talk to her family. They agreed to come down for one of our charity benefit galas that we were hosting. And our goal was to surprise and reconcile her to the family of our fallen officer. And we did that. Extremely emotional.

And so she came, embraced officers, heard the stories of how great our officer who was killed was, and ultimately exchanged information with some of us so that we could support her at her college graduation the following semester. And we did just that. We packed up, we went to North Carolina, and supported her in her endeavors of graduating as a college graduate.

Sonia Q.: Very inspiring, Jakisha. Definitely motivating. Extremely encouraging. Ultimately, as leaders, modeling the way. Phenomenal. I'm so happy and pleased that others are seeing you and taking your lead as a positive outcome.

Jakisha J.: Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story, and I'm sure there are so many others who have experienced things in our profession that have caused some type of experience that they've overcome, but I appreciate the opportunity to share not only my experience for the grief that was experienced but the empowerment that came from seeking help. So, thank you so much.

Sonia Q.: Excellent. And reminder to everybody: take care of yourselves. Jakisha, I really want to thank you very much for taking the time to speak with me today on this very, very important topic. I encourage our listeners to visit the SAFLEO website at safleo.org for more information on this topic and any other officer safety and wellness topics. Everyone listening today, 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 Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. The Bureau of Justice Assistance, BJA, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice is committed to making our nation's communities safer through resources, developing programs, and providing grant funding opportunities to support state, local, and tribal criminal justice efforts. All are available at no cost. Please visit www.bja.gov to learn more.

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