



Officer Safety and Wellness

MINDFULNESS TECHNIQUES TO COMBAT STRESS

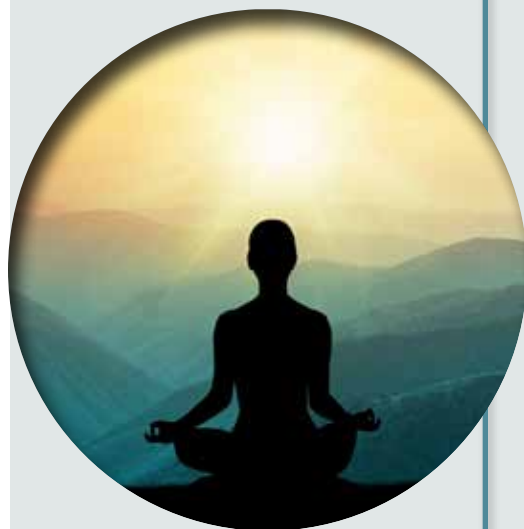
FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS

Written by
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(Retired)



CONTROLLING BREATH, MIND, AND BODY

MINDFULNESS
IS THE PRACTICE OF
CONTROLLING OUR
BREATH, MINDS, AND
BODIES IN A WAY
THAT STRENGTHENS
OUR ABILITY TO
CONCENTRATE,
REACT CALMLY,
COPE BETTER, AND
BE MORE RESILIENT.



As law enforcement officers, we expect to experience a high level of stress and anxiety during our careers. Chronic stress can lead to poor performance, family problems, and a host of health-related issues.¹ Stress can have a way of creeping up on us and taking its toll, especially when it goes unchecked. In my 42-year law enforcement career, I have experienced excessive stress many times, especially while working extended undercover assignments. My long-term deployments under harsh environmental conditions led to a dislocated jaw from grinding my teeth, as well as bouts of chronic acid reflux.

In 2017, I was invited to attend a weeklong mindfulness immersion class. Mindfulness techniques are based on the principle that in order to be mentally and physically prepared at all times to help others, we must first take care of ourselves. Essentially, mindfulness is the practice of controlling our breath, minds, and bodies in a way that strengthens our ability to concentrate, react calmly, cope better, and be more resilient. For law enforcement officers, mindfulness techniques can be used as tools to prepare and respond before, during, and after a critical incident. The information presented in the mindfulness course showed, among other benefits, that mindfulness can improve at least three skills that we often identify as being critical to officer safety and well-being: responding to in-the-moment situations, surviving to see another day, and recovering.

Over the course of the week, we were scheduled to learn yoga-based mindfulness techniques and practices for short- and long-term stress relief. The class was held at a yoga center—for me, a new experience. As introductions began, I discovered that I was surrounded by educators, medical personnel, and detention workers from throughout the local area. All had either volunteered to be there or had been directed by their employers to attend. I was sure that this experience was going to miss the mark for someone like me, since I was used to an established and regimented environment.

Completely out of my comfort zone and skeptical about how yoga-based practices could help me, I was reluctant and anxious about participating. On the first day, I felt awkward and anxious just sitting on the floor in a circle with total strangers. Either anticipating or sensing my anxiety and lack of enthusiasm, the trainers crafted my training specifically to help me cope with this new stress that I was experiencing. By the start of the second day,

¹ Olivia Johnson, DM, MA, and Tina Jaeckle, Ph.D., LCSW, BCETS, FNCCM, *Mitigating the Emotional Impact of Stress on Law Enforcement Personnel*, April 2018, <https://www.valorforblue.org/Documents/SOS%20Stress%20-%20Johnson%20Jaeckle%20Emotional%20Impact%20of%20Stress%20on%20LE.pdf>.

CONCENTRATION. REACTION. COPING. RESILIENCE.

I was beginning to understand the techniques and to experience a sense of calmness I had never known. By the third day, I was very comfortable with the practice of focused breath and meditation. I really was not expecting to discover much more, except maybe how to perform the basic maneuvers of the practice of mindfulness.

During an exercise on the third day, the group was instructed to focus on directing controlled breath to a specific part of the body that was experiencing pain or discomfort. Throughout the training, I had been experiencing tension and pain in my neck, and the pain had increased as the training progressed. I decided to focus on that pain during the exercise. To my delight, I began to feel relief from the pain in my neck, and within minutes it disappeared completely. I am certain that this relief came precisely at the time of the focused breath exercise. Since then, I have used this breathing technique several times when feeling overwhelmed by work or life's routine obligations, and it has worked every time.

In my experience, some people respond to physical exercises, and others respond to the practice of centering themselves in the moment to create a sense of acute awareness of their outer environments. Others may find that meditation brings about calmness and slows down their minds. For some officers, these techniques may provide ways to become calm in the moment, relieve tension and pain, or focus on the situation at hand. The bottom line is that long-term stress can be life-threatening if it is not treated, and mindfulness training can be another tool to have under our belts, along with other techniques that relieve tension and anxiety. But unlike going to the gym, going for a bike ride, or playing golf, mindfulness is a technique that is available at a moment's notice.

FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS, MINDFULNESS TECHNIQUES CAN BE USED AS TOOLS TO PREPARE AND RESPOND BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER A CRITICAL INCIDENT.

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MINDFULNESS TECHNIQUES



TO COMBAT STRESS

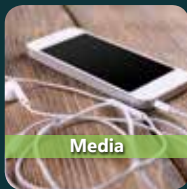


MAJOR MICHAEL HARDEE (RETIRED)

Major Michael Hardee is Vice President of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) National Academy Associates, Florida Chapter, with a 42-year career in law enforcement. He has served in multiple law enforcement capacities, including senior-level management positions for more than 20 years. Major Hardee served with the Clay County, Florida, Sheriff's Office as the Administration Bureau Commander. From 1994 to 2003, he was with the 4th Judicial Circuit State Attorney's Office as an investigator in the special prosecution division, and prior to that, he worked with the Florida Game and Fish Commission since 1976

as a law enforcement officer. A graduate of the 232nd Session of the FBI National Academy, he has also served on the Board of Trustees of Goddard College, in Plainsfield, Vermont. Major Hardee has developed environmental undercover operations that have been featured on ABC's 20/20 and Primetime Live. He is a former instructor at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers in Glynco, Georgia, and the Southern Environmental Enforcement Network in Acworth, Georgia. He also chaired the First Coast Environmental Crimes Task Force in Jacksonville, Florida. He is a former consultant for the RISE program with the Kripalu Center, developing curricula and training for first responders. Major Hardee earned a bachelor of arts degree from Goddard College and is a master's candidate at the American Military University in Charles Town, West Virginia.

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