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## Mindfulness and Law Enforcement: An Effective Approach to Implementing Mindfulness for First Responders

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Mindfulness and Law Enforcement:  
An Effective Approach to Implementing Mindfulness for First Responders

Gina Rollo White

A THESIS

Submitted to the M. A. Mindfulness Studies Program

Of Lesley University

in Partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts

May 2017

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	4
List of Tables.....	5
Literature Review .....	7
How Mindfulness Works .....	9
Mindfulness Studies on Individual Populations.....	12
High Mental-Stress Levels in Law Enforcement.....	14
High Physical-Stress Levels in Law Enforcement .....	14
They Need It.....	15
Factors Associated with Stress .....	16
Lack of stress training. When looking at the factors related to stress of those working in law enforcement, a strong conclusion can be made that police officers would greatly benefit from some sort of behavioral / stress management training. In an article on bringing mindfulness to law enforcement, Stone (2015) writes “The average police recruit spends 58 hours learning to use a gun but only eight hours on de-escalation and, if they’re lucky, a mere hour on stress management” (para. 15). Officers are stressed, overworked and overwhelmed with their jobs and the departments are not helping them by 1) being slow movers and 2) not incorporating any type of stress management in job training.....	17
Gender. According to Occupational Stress, Anxiety and Coping Strategies in Police Officers (2015), although different between genders, police officers as a whole reported high levels of stress. “Female and male police officers suffered from distress caused by different stressors. The consequences and coping strategies adopted differed according to gender, role and sector of operation” (Maran, Varetto, Zedda, & Ieraci). And although the strategies differed, the study showed that stress and anxiety play a large role in the occupation of police officers. Unfortunately the strategies applied are self-taught and tend to lean inward. According to Garner, Baker & Hagelgans:.....	17
Fatigue. These private experiences tend to not be addressed or processed, leaving one filled with stress, anxiety, and even fatigue. A study by Basinska, Wiciak, & Dadernan (2014) on officer fatigue found that fatigue and burnout often affect police officers. The result of officer fatigue on work related incidents presents in the following way: more sick time used, increased difficulty managing successful personal relationships, time management issues (reporting for duty on time), mistakes made on departmental and court paperwork, on duty sleeping (often due to shiftwork), higher rates of citizen complaints for reported misconduct, problems communicating with supervisors, stressful relationships with superiors, problems testifying in court, more accidental injuries on duty, early retirement (often due to burnout), higher risk of being seriously injured or killed because of lack of focus and not recognizing danger signs. The study also found fatigue effected officers health in the following ways: impaired judgment, weight gain and unhealthy weight loss, severe mood swings, impaired eye-hand coordination, increased anxiety or depression, increased change of substance-abuse addiction, increased	

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

gastrointestinal problems (loss of appetite and/or stomach ulcers), increased reports of back pain and frequent headaches, increased chance of PTSD, inappropriate reactions to a situation (excessive use of force), increased risk of serious health problems such as diabetes or cardiovascular disease.....	18
Barriers to Entry .....	18
Mindfulness Supports Qualities for Success .....	20
Initiative.....	21
Sense of Ethics.....	22
Respect and Knowledge of Laws .....	23
Communication Skills .....	24
Common Sense.....	26
Civility .....	27
Service Mentality .....	28
Humility .....	29
Controlled Temper .....	30
Thirst for Knowledge .....	31
Success Story .....	32
Current Mindfulness Training Availability for Law Enforcement.....	33
Mind the Gap.....	36
The gap.....	36
Methods .....	38
The Beginning: What Didn't Work.....	38
Original Session.....	40
Development of Program .....	41
Mindfulness Training Immersion Workshop.....	41
Workshop Structure .....	42
Daily Practice is Essential (practice – practice – practice) .....	43
Conclusion of Workshop.....	44
Questionnaire Data Collection .....	44
Discussion .....	45
Limitations of These Studies.....	45
Commentary Findings .....	46
Data Findings.....	47
Analysis .....	48
Emerging Questions .....	49
Next Steps .....	49
Conclusion .....	50
Appendix A .....	52
Appendix B .....	54
Appendix C.....	59
Appendix D .....	63
Tables.....	64
Table 1: Pre and Post Questionnaire Numbers .....	64
Table 2: Change in Overall Score by Subject.....	66
References .....	67

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

### Abstract

An increasing number of studies show that people employed as first responders in high trauma service jobs tend to experience a high level of stress, at work and after hours. Studies suggest that constant exposure to job related stress leads to both physical and mental dysregulation. This study looks at the effects of implementing mindfulness tools and techniques to those working in law enforcement. Other works on this topic report mindfulness as a successful tool to increase wellbeing to a broad spectrum of populations. The methodology used in this study was designed specifically for first responders. The data findings were gathered through pre and post self-perceived stress questionnaires at three different law enforcement agencies. The conclusion is shown as a final number that indicated either an increase or decrease in stress.

The findings suggest that a two-hour mindfulness workshop decreases self-perceived stress for those working in high trauma jobs. While there are numerous studies based on mindfulness interventions, and numerous studies based on stress levels of first responders, only a few combine both. The findings in this study are based on one population, first responders, and are therefore streamlined and concentrated. The conclusion and implications for future study suggest that 1) mindfulness programs may be successful in decreasing stress, and 2) incorporating mindfulness as a part of first responder training could lead to an increase in wellbeing.

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

**List of Tables**

Table 1: Pre and Post Questionnaire Numbers

Table 2: Change in Overall Score by Subject

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

### Mindfulness and Law Enforcement

My desire to study mindfulness as it relates to first responders is an outcome of my childhood experiences. My father was a fire fighter and paramedic and my mother was the head nurse of a trauma-unit emergency room. Both of my parents dealt with chaos, injuries, and death every day. I saw firsthand how daily stressors and fear can negatively impact a family. While my father was able to rescue numerous people from car accidents and fires, he also lost too many to count. And my mother dealt with death and violence on a daily basis as well. Not only was she part of the emergency response team, she was also responsible for informing family members that their loved ones were gone.

Unfortunately the stress involved in both their jobs did not remain at work when the day was over. As much as they tried to shield us, their stress seeped out in unhealthy ways. My father dealt with stress by punching holes in the wall, flipping couches, and road rage. My mother was a bit subtler, but the effect was just as bad. She would hide her emotions, acting as if everything was fine. She would keep her feelings on the surface, never diving very deep; then she would explode. The energy my parents brought home from work was toxic. Destruction (emotional and physical) was never far off the horizon. In the end though, it was the other side of their energy that unknowingly planted the seeds of mindfulness. They were both caretakers; their jobs were to maintain the safety and health of the community as a whole. Their decision to put their own wellness at risk in order to help those in need indirectly paved the way for my inquiry into sharing mindfulness with first responders. Analyzing the outcome of implementing a mindfulness program addresses my desire to provide a path away from suffering and

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

towards overall wellbeing, specifically to those who put themselves on the front lines of stress every day.

### **Literature Review**

This paper addresses how mindfulness techniques work both physically and mentally as tools to reduce stress. It then discusses stresses involved in working as first responders, studies that support the need for stress reduction with this population, and the barriers involved in starting/applying a mindfulness program. The paper continues to explain how applying mindfulness supports qualities for success in law enforcement, what mindfulness training opportunities are currently available, and finally where a gap exists between mindfulness training and bringing mindfulness to those working in law enforcement.

Numerous mindfulness programs have been studied and implemented over the last decade on the general population, with more and more coming out narrowing the focus on specific populations. These populations include education, children, adolescence, health care, caregivers, sports, hospitals, politics, military, and many others. While mindfulness research has been conducted on the above populations very few focus on high stress and high trauma populations such as first responders, and specifically those working in law enforcement. There are, however, numerous studies related to general stress levels of first responders and the negative impact stress has on that population. These studies are show that stress for those working in law enforcement, whether as a police officer, deputy, probation officer, or a volunteer, can have a negative impact on one's health and wellbeing. According to a study by Anderson (2016) on the effects of



## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

reducing stress on active duty police officers, when dealing with a traumatic situations, if one does not have the right tools to draw from, cognitive awareness can decrease, leaving one in a high state of agitation, and can even lead to an inability to act during a threat.

These traumatic stressors occur as on the job threats, and often times roll over to every day stressors of life (i.e. finances, home life & health). When stress occurs at work and at home, sometimes the individual feels there is no relief in site.

When one is in a constant state of stress, studies show that stress hormone levels increase in the system leading to a compromised mental and even physical state. According to a study by Lim & Cheong (2015), enduring a high state of stress correlates to a decreased immune function over time. “Continuation of these pathologic conditions can also provoke impairment of the immune systems” (p. 530). This continued mental and physical discord (chronic stress) has been implicated in an increase in stress hormone levels, which may pose a health risk to all, but especially those working in an environment with a high exposure to stress. Those working in high trauma / stress jobs, including those working as first responders, are more likely to be exposed to these pathological conditions and should be considered an at risk population for constant stress and thus a compromised immune system. As I will demonstrate, studies on stress show a relationship between levels of stress and mental and physical wellbeing. Studies show those working in law enforcement are under a tremendous amount of stress. As studies surrounding the application mindfulness increase, more outcomes are substantiating that the implementation of the practice of mindfulness can decrease stress and increase wellbeing. Unfortunately there have been very few studies that look at the combination

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

of overall stress, stress for first responders, and subsequently, the application of mindfulness as a tool to regulate adverse mental outcomes.

Accordingly, this research paper looks at existing studies of stress, existing studies of mindfulness, and documents an original applied workshop of Mindfulness Training in Law Enforcement; both hands on training and a follow up study. This paper will discuss the need for mindfulness and how results from pre and post mindfulness workshop suggest that adding mindfulness as a tool to decrease stress may have a positive impact on self perceived daily wellbeing. The purpose of this thesis is to study the impact mindfulness training has on self-perceived wellbeing for those working as first responders (with a greater focus on those working in law enforcement).

### **How Mindfulness Works**

Training the mind is similar to training a muscle in the body. While the brain is not a muscle (it is an organ), it does have similar attributes to that of a muscle. Like a muscle, the more one activates a particular part of the brain, the more one can build up that specific area (and thus have it respond the way in which it is being trained.) While we used to believe that the average brain developed only into the adolescent years, studies are now showing that the brain has an ability to change even in adult years. According to Daniel Siegel (2010), a Harvard trained M.D. who is a global leader in the integration of science (regarding the brain) and psychotherapy, development of the brain “is not just available to us in youth: We now know that it can occur throughout the lifespan” (p. 5). The change and growth occur depending on how the brain is being used; new ways of thinking can change the brain. This is similar to how one trains for a

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

sport or for endurance. An Olympic athlete, for instance, does not qualify for the Olympics simply by willing it to be. S/he trains the body every day, and trains for specific tasks. In order to stay in shape, the runner must continually run, the basketball player must shoot free throws over and over, and the gymnasts must practice balancing and flips - every day. Just as muscles grow from repeated tasks, so does the brain.

Studies of the brain have shown the impact that mindfulness has on the actual structure of the brain, specifically the ability of the brain to increase gray matter by repeated performances of specific mindful tasks. The ability of the brain to generate new pathways (new habits) from repeated actions is called neuroplasticity. Siegal, explains neuroplasticity as “the term used to describe this capacity for creating new neural connections and growing new neurons in response to experience” (2010, p. 5). A result of neuroplasticity is the ability of the brain to change, from reactions based on habit to responses based on purposely-shaped thoughts. Changes can include negative behaviors like stopping a biting nails habit, and even deeper reactions like changing habitual reactions to anger, anxiety and stress. The structural changes that can occur as a result of mindfulness meditation practices have been implicated not only in emotional responses, but also physical responses such as the ability to decrease one’s blood pressure.

According to Vestergaard-Poulsen, et al:

Our findings show that long-term practitioners of meditation have structural differences in brainstem regions concerned with cardiorespiratory control. This could account for some of the cardiorespiratory parasympathetic effects and traits,

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

as well as the cognitive, emotional, and immunoreactive impact reported in several studies of different meditation practices. (2009, p. 170)

These findings, that repeated mindfulness does in fact lead to structural changes in the brain, reinforce the importance of learning and repeatedly practicing mindfulness.

Irrespective of the situation (stress, emergency, surprise), and regardless of the magnitude of any emotion that is experienced, mindfulness teaches one to be accepting of the present moment, non-judgmentally. Further studies are reporting that training the mind by repeatedly practicing mindfulness has positive effects of both the regulation and response of emotions. According to a study conducted by Prakash, Hussain, & Schirda , “Our findings highlight the idea that emotion regulation plays a central role in the relationship between mindfulness and stress” (2015, p. 169). By meditating frequently and focusing on the breath, rather than engaging in rumination on a perceived issue or emotion, one can bring an awareness to a given situation. This awareness then allows the person to comprehend the problem, but not directly engage with the content. This is similar to sitting and watching a movie, rather than getting up and interacting with the characters. Being mindful grants permission to experience situations in their raw and unprocessed forms. This approach allows one to perceive events in a new way, and respond with awareness and purpose. Allowing an individual to break the cycle of negative thoughts gives them an opportunity to stop responding out of previously developed habits. The resulting feelings of emotional well-being reinforce the desire to decrease repetitive thoughts of stress, as well as increase the desire to be more mindful. When incorporating mindfulness into their daily lives, participants in a study by Ames,

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

Richardson, Payne, Smith, & Leigh “described how mindfulness had benefited them through increasing their awareness and facilitating distance from thoughts and strong emotions” (2014, p. 77). By creating space between an emotion and a reaction, first responders can then respond in a way that is less destructive to their emotional state.

### **Mindfulness Studies on Individual Populations**

The recent years have shown a significant increase in studies addressing the benefits of mindfulness across various populations. In one study that looked at the adolescent population, results supported the relationship between decreased depressive symptoms and perceived stress, and the application of mindfulness techniques.

According to Edwards, Adams, Waldo, Hadfield, & Biegel, “Following participation in the groups, the adolescents’ mindfulness and self-compassion scores significantly increased, and their perceived stress and depression significantly decreased” (2014, p. 160). Because mindfulness is about grounding consciousness in the present moment, the mind is less likely to wander towards self-generated negative mental views about the past and future. The study showed that by using redirecting techniques the mind is able to step away from rumination, regret, anxiety, and other experiences that can decrease the feelings of well-being.

In one study on mindfulness and anxiety disorders, Goldin and Gross (2010) look at applying an 8-week mindfulness class (general population) and the impacts over time on areas of the brain implicated in anxiety and emotional regulation. Participants underwent stressful scenarios while the brain was being studied in an MRI. Marked improvements were seen after the 8-week mindfulness intervention; 14 of the 16

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

participants showed improvements in anxiety, depression and self-esteem after the intervention.

Another study, “Alterations in Brain and Immune Function Produced by Mindfulness Meditation,” Davidson et al. (2003) looked at brain activity in specific regions, before and after an 8-week mindfulness intervention. The conclusion showed that “meditation can produce increases in relative left-sided anterior activation that are associated with reductions in anxiety and negative affect and increases in positive affect” (p. 569). This study suggests that emotional regulation, through meditation, activates parts of the brain that are associated with positive emotions.

In a study on teaching mindfulness to police officers, Christopher et al. (2015) found that, “Similarly, after the 8-week MBRT course, our sample demonstrated significant decreases in sleep disturbance, anger, fatigue, burnout, difficulties with emotion regulation, general stress, organizational police stress, and operational police stress” (p. 24). Mindfulness studies and training continues to show that meditation and mindfulness tools can be beneficial in a multitude of ways: decrease stress, increase sleep, improve relationships, regulate emotions, increase well being, fine tune awareness, and increase compassion & empathy.

Research continues to be published supporting a positive outcome of applying mindfulness training; benefiting most and specifically benefiting those under stress.

According to Chambers, Gullone, & Allen:

Mindfulness involves a systematic retraining of awareness and non-reactivity, leading to diffusion from whatever is experienced, and allowing the individual to

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

more consciously choose those thoughts, emotions, and sensations they will identify with, rather than habitually reacting to them. In this way, it erodes the automatic process of appraisal that gives rise to disturbing emotions in the first place. (2009, p. 11)

While there are many psychological therapies that currently exist on treating stress disorders, the influx of mindfulness studies is showing substantial success at having an impact / outcome on regulating emotions and thus reducing self perceived stress.

### **High Mental-Stress Levels in Law Enforcement**

First responders are defined as employees of an emergency service, and are generally the first to arrive and provide help and care in traumatic situations. They typically don't know the details or seriousness of the situation until they arrive, and are therefore trained in a spectrum of medical emergencies. As a result of constant interactions with the "unknown," as well as ongoing chaos and trauma, first responders tend to exist in a constant high level of stress. Flannery notes that "This population remains at risk, given the daily occurrence of critical incidents" (2014, p. 261). Studies are showing that constant exposure to stress can lead to physical and mental dis-regulation. While the stress levels may be different for each responder, studies are showing a large number of first responders moving beyond a basic stress state and into an actual diagnosis of psychological trauma. Flannery "documents the onset of psychological trauma anywhere from 5.9 to 22 % of first responders responding to a critical incident" (2014, p. 261).

### **High Physical-Stress Levels in Law Enforcement**

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

While psychological trauma is a mental state, stress has been shown to impact the physical body as well. According to one study on stress related to working as a first responder, Andersen (2016) found that stress can have a negative impact on bodily function, and often times causes an increase in heart rate. The study pointed out that “heart rate reactivity above 150 BPM has been shown to be associated with performance detriments because sensory distortions, such as tunnel vision and auditory exclusion, are likely to occur” (p. 8), and that “individuals who are routinely exposed to high stress, threatening encounters are two and three times the risk of chronic medical conditions, including cardiovascular disease” (p. 8). In order to cope with this chronic stress state, tools are needed help manage these stress levels and increase compassion and empathy.

### **They Need It**

Learning to control impulse and emotional reactivity is often times not a natural occurrence; training is frequently needed to hone these skills. According to a study on work stress and metabolic syndrome in police officers, Garbarino explains, “The well-being of workers engaged in law enforcement is a guarantee of safety for the community. For this reason we must focus on the prevention of stress in police officers and combat the stigma associated with distress and disease” 2015, (p. 10). Unmanaged stress in first responders not only has a negative impact on the community, but it can also lead to many personal mental and physical disorders often times resulting in anger, anxiety, depression, sickness, and sleep deprivation.

Police officers have a very high level of on job stress. Many become depressed and are unable to handle their emotions. According to a study on mindfulness and police



## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

recruits, research suggests, “mindfulness was found to be the best predictor of depression in recently appointed police. Those recruits who tended to be less open to present experiences at entry experienced higher levels of depressive symptomatology following their transition into the workplace” (Williams, Ciarrochi & Deane, 2010, p. 280). The study concluded “results suggest that police officers and police organisations may benefit from interventions aimed at developing and promoting mindfulness and emotion identification” (p. 1). By recognizing their emotions, law enforcement agents will not only be less stressed while working, but also better able to show more compassion to those with whom they are working.

### **Factors Associated with Stress**

When looking at factors that lead to increased stress on the job, three stand out as particularly significant: 1) lack of stress management training, 2) gender inequalities, and 3) on the job fatigue.

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

**Lack of stress training.** When looking at the factors related to stress of those working in law enforcement, a strong conclusion can be made that police officers would greatly benefit from some sort of behavioral / stress management training. In an article on bringing mindfulness to law enforcement, Stone (2015) writes “The average police recruit spends 58 hours learning to use a gun but only eight hours on de-escalation and, if they’re lucky, a mere hour on stress management” (para. 15). Officers are stressed, overworked and overwhelmed with their jobs and the departments are not helping them by 1) being slow movers and 2) not incorporating any type of stress management in job training.

**Gender.** According to Occupational Stress, Anxiety and Coping Strategies in Police Officers (2015), although different between genders, police officers as a whole reported high levels of stress. “Female and male police officers suffered from distress caused by different stressors. The consequences and coping strategies adopted differed according to gender, role and sector of operation” (Maran, Varetto, Zedda, & Ieraci). And although the strategies differed, the study showed that stress and anxiety play a large role in the occupation of police officers. Unfortunately the strategies applied are self-taught and tend to lean inward. According to Garner, Baker & Hagelgans:

Most physical and psychological trauma of first responders remains hidden in their private experiences, not often shared in the counseling setting or with the responders' social networks. The private trauma can lead to unhealthy patterns in their own psychological sense-making of the world, and in the patterns of interaction within the responders' personal, work, and social lives. (2016, p. 182)

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

**Fatigue.** These private experiences tend to not be addressed or processed, leaving one filled with stress, anxiety, and even fatigue. A study by Basinska, Wiciak, & Dadernan (2014) on officer fatigue found that fatigue and burnout often affect police officers. The result of officer fatigue on work related incidents presents in the following way: more sick time used, increased difficulty managing successful personal relationships, time management issues (reporting for duty on time), mistakes made on departmental and court paperwork, on duty sleeping (often due to shiftwork), higher rates of citizen complaints for reported misconduct, problems communicating with supervisors, stressful relationships with superiors, problems testifying in court, more accidental injuries on duty, early retirement (often due to burnout), higher risk of being seriously injured or killed because of lack of focus and not recognizing danger signs. The study also found fatigue effected officers health in the following ways: impaired judgment, weight gain and unhealthy weight loss, severe mood swings, impaired eye-hand coordination, increased anxiety or depression, increased change of substance-abuse addiction, increased gastrointestinal problems (loss of appetite and/or stomach ulcers), increased reports of back pain and frequent headaches, increased chance of PTSD, inappropriate reactions to a situation (excessive use of force), increased risk of serious health problems such as diabetes or cardiovascular disease.

### **Barriers to Entry**

Law enforcement culture carries with it certain positive identifiers such as strength, courage, and care for community. But it also carries with it the burden of certain stigmas such as aggression and anger. These stigmas make it difficult to not only identify

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

when something is creating stress, but also makes it difficult to come forward with any mental health issues. Flannery writes that “First responders as a group are action-oriented, self-contained, deferential men and women where “complaining” is not acceptable behavior and seeking mental health counseling for impairments arising from doing one’s job is not likely to be thought about” (2014, p. 262). He explains that first responders are more likely to address the outcome of their stress, their symptoms, by self-diagnosis and self-medication. The outcome is often time’s substance abuse and other abusive behavior.

Due to the stigmas surrounding mental health, self-diagnosing becomes an easier path than reaching out for help. The stigma of admitting to an issue is twofold: 1) internal self-worth related to strength of body and mind (as opposed to weakness), and 2) perceived ability to do one’s job. Regarding internal issues, according to PoliceOne.com, and on-line resource for law enforcement officers, Olson and Wasilewski (2016) write, “the stigma attached to admitting the need for help would be taken as a sign of weakness or indication they are no longer fit or trustworthy to do the job” (What are the answers? section, para. 1). And regarding on the job ability to perform, Olson and Wasilewski (2016) write, “Some agencies require officers seeking or receiving mental health treatment, or who take psychotropic drugs, to inform the department and even face duty restrictions while under such care” (What are the answers? section, para. 2). This cycle leads to not only a personal suffering, but also an inability to acknowledge there is actual suffering and then makes it even more difficult to come forward and ask for help.

Training law enforcement personnel in mindfulness would not only cultivate

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

qualities for on the job success, it would also cultivate overall wellness and healthy living for each practitioner. Unfortunately there is a lot of push back when trying to incorporate new programs like mindfulness into an industry such as this. When discussing the implementation of a mindfulness program with Sheriff Deputy Valarie Wright, she explained the internal resistance, “Law enforcement agencies tend to be very conservative and are slow to move. They don’t like change and they are not typically seen as overly progressive” (V. Wright, personal communication, December 11, 2015). While bringing mindfulness to the agencies might be a hard sell, numerous programs and studies have already shown that mindfulness compliments the attributes of those working in law enforcement.

### **Mindfulness Supports Qualities for Success**

Law enforcement agencies look for specific qualities in potential employees. These qualities prove to be integral in the success of an officer. According to Larry E. Capps, a retired assistant to the chief of the Missouri City, Texas Police Department, writes that when looking to hire candidates, “10 factors prove crucial to a police officer’s success” (2014, p. 1); initiative, sense of ethics, respect and knowledge of laws, communication skills, common sense, civility, service mentality, humility, controlled temper, and thirst for new knowledge. But once they are in the police department, these skills need support to grow or they will slowly over time dissolve. Training a first responder in mindfulness can cultivate these sought after qualities needed to be a good police officer.

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

### **Initiative**

When working in law enforcement, whether it's on the streets as a police officer, in the jail unit as a deputy, or at a home visit as a probation officer, one must be an independent thinker. The everyday activities of law enforcement personnel are not black and white, and not always obvious. Being able to foresee an issue, or follow a pattern of crime and then act prior to the crime occurring, is part of what makes one successful. According to Capps, "The important point is that the officer observing these situations must take the initiative to intervene and uncover crime" (2014, p. 1). Things can go awry at the drop of a hat, and being able to take control and act before others do may be the difference between finding a crime, letting criminals slip away, or sometimes even life or death. One component of having initiative requires the individual to be proactive, rather than reactive. If caught up in reaction, the chemistry of the mind changes, causing one to react from stress rather than from foresight.

Reacting without awareness in many circumstances can lead to harmful outcomes like excessive violence and shootings. According to Mapping Police Violence (2017), a research collaborative collecting comprehensive data on police killings nationwide, recorded statistics in 2015 show that unarmed victims are being shot yearly, and of those victims, black people are three times more likely than white people to be killed by a police officer; 30% of black victims shot by police officers were unarmed, compared to 19% of white victims. Without proper training, when caught up in the emotion of a situation, the ability to observe what is actually occurring is obscured by triggers, leaving

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

an officer in a reactive rather responsive state. This leads to a decrease in the ability to initiate.

Mindfulness has been proven to change the makeup of the brain by cultivating awareness through meditation. By actively guiding one's thoughts, one becomes aware of emotions, feelings and reactions. This process has been proven to change the structure of the brain. Siegel (2010) explains this concept, neuroplasticity, as the "capacity for creating new neural connections and growing new neurons in response to experience" (p. 5). By meditating, using mindfulness techniques, one can actually change the way one reacts to situations. By changing the brain from a reactive state to a proactive state, law enforcement personnel can learn to respond thoughtfully rather than react.

### **Sense of Ethics**

Law enforcement agents often work with the buddy system in mind. Making sure to have your partner's back is just part of the job. And sometimes this means making sure your partner walks the line of morality. But making sure your partner remains ethical can be trying, and requires a lot of patience and compassion. Siegel (2010) explains that if not guided by understanding and compassion, one's response to others' is to become hostile and inflexible, thus losing one's moral compass.

It is important to consider not only the ethics of others, but also one's own ethics. This includes how one conducts their life at home but also at work. When leading a life filled with deceit, harm to others, harm to self, stealing, cheating, alcohol or drug abuse, the consequences are destructive. These acts have negative effects on the body, the psyche, as well as affecting those they work with. To generate peace in one's mind and

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

heart, one must have the intention of accomplishing this.

According to Kabat-Zinn (2005):

In this way, just by forming the intention to recognize and back away from such impulses, we can begin to shift over from unhealthy, what Buddhists quaintly but accurately call “unwholesome,” and destructive mind states and actions to healthier, more wholesome, and less clouded mind states and body state. (p. 103) Mindfulness allows one to work with these destructive behaviors / thoughts, so as not to repress them. Mindfulness brings to surface the issues, allowing one to bring awareness to them, rather than being submerged in them. When one can step back and see ones actions as unethical, or that their partner is acting destructively, and examine this from a judgment free perspective, one can then respond in a way that allows for an open highway of reciprocal support of co-workers.

### **Respect and Knowledge of Laws**

Another quality for law enforcement success is the ability to actually comprehend, recall and respect the laws. According to a study by Ruocco and Direkoglu (2012) when looking at individuals who meditate, a connection was shown between retaining and recalling information with those who cultivated awareness through meditation. The findings indicate “the ability to optimally sustain performance over the course of a prolonged visual attention task may be related to individual differences in awareness” (p. 229). The unintended outcome of not being able to focus shows up in one’s ability to recall information. The ability to both retain and recall is mandatory when it comes to knowledge of the laws. When the mind is distracted, one’s full attention cannot be



## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

directed to the task at hand, i.e., recalling relevant and time sensitive information.

Mindfulness teaches just that: purposeful direction of thoughts by training one to repeatedly focus. In meditation, the training of repeated focus is to continually direct one's awareness to the breath. The instructions are simple. Breathe, focus on the breath, and breathe some more. When noticing that one's attention has wandered away from the breath, the instruction is to simply guide one's thoughts back to the breath. This teaches one to a) notice that the mind has wandered and b) re direct the mind back to the initial focal point. This training teaches the mind to become aware that it has traveled, and simply redirect it to the task at hand. Mind wandering (day dreaming, thinking of the future or past, ruminating on situations) takes ones attention away from the original intended focus, and away from the present moment. When one is able to focus, keep the mind from wandering, resources can be directed - purposefully - so one does not lose track of the goal. If a law enforcement agent is in a critical moment, the ability to remain focused will encourage the mind to recall the specific knowledge (law) needed at that time.

### **Communication Skills**

Complex social situations occur every day for those in law enforcement. Negotiations, calming tempers, explanations, are all par for the course. The ability to communicate in a way that does not ignite a situation, or cause more harm than good, is a skill that requires work. When one gets caught up in the feelings of conflict, the communication chain is broken, and a situation can quickly fall apart.

Kabat-Zinn (2005) writes,

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

Becoming even a little more mindful of how our conversation and communication unfold, and what kind of skills might be involved in navigating through them with greater awareness of what is really going on, inwardly and outwardly, in ourselves and with others, can be extremely revealing and humbling. (p. 416)

Valerie Wright, deputy for the Alexandria Sheriff's Department, explains that communication is a daily struggle and that managing behaviors can be very taxing. "We have to deal with multiple personalities, varying degrees of behaviors, manage and mediate problems, resolve issues, know when to calm them (inmates) down, or when to get a counselor involved. Without good communication skills, life in the agency can very very stressful" (personal communication, December 11, 2015).

Learning to convey information in a polite yet firm handed way is needed not only externally to those one is working with, but also internally with oneself. Kabat-Zinn (2005) explains the importance of looking within: "Before we can convey how we are actually feeling or seeing something, we have to be aware of that terrain within ourselves" (p. 415). When one gets caught up in the feelings of a conflict, communication skills suffer. Mindfulness teaches one to notice the feelings of another person, without getting caught up in those feelings. Once a person learns that they are not their emotions, but that they have emotions, the communication takes on a new form that decreases reaction, and allows one to hear what another is saying, without internalizing it and making it their own feelings.

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

### **Common Sense**

Law enforcement must use common sense to avoid extremes, as well as solve and prevent problems. Having common sense is the ability to relate / attune to a situation and respond accordingly. This ability requires one to tap into a part of the brain that allows one to connect with what is currently taking place. Siegel (2010) explains that a specific part of the brain – the prefrontal cortex – is responsible for nine distinct functions; he discusses Attuned Communication as being one of them. “When we attune to others we allow our internal state to shift, to come to resonate with the inner world of another” (p. 27). Only by being aware of the internal world of others can one have Common Sense. By bridging the gap between ones emotions and the emotions of another enable a law enforcement agent to respond in a reasonable way and make good decisions.

When making decisions, it is important to recognize that whatever event is occurring, is not the totality of all experiences. Siegel discusses the ability to synthesize ones reactions by explaining a “tripod of reflection”: openness, observation, and objectivity (2010, p. 31). Using this type of reflection allows one to take control of their minds, thus respond to situations appropriately; as Seigel explains, “Without the tripod, our mind may be visible to us only as a blurry busy hive of activity whose fine details are lost in jumping images and fleeting feelings” (2010, p. 31). It is important to notice that each moment is just that one moment that has occurred. With the proper reflection, common sense can be applied to reach mutually beneficial resolutions. By being aware, through mindfulness, that the three legs of the tripod must be present to reach solutions,

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

law enforcement personnel can avoid unnecessary pitfalls.

### **Civility**

Capps defines characteristics of civility as “represented by action or inaction—include tolerance, kindness, consideration, and understanding” (2015, para. 13). When an officer or agent loses sight of this characteristic, they become desensitized to the needs of their community. “If an officer does not have civility as a characteristic, they can lose sight of right or wrong, and can become desensitized to those around them” (V. Wright, personal communication, December 11, 2015). Becoming desensitized is learned by reinforcing bad habits and then responding over time as if on automatic pilot. The outcome of such responses leads one to be rigid in their approach, and only see things as black or white.

Mindfulness increases awareness, allowing one to see the varying scope of possibilities - even if that means not knowing the right path. In his book Bringing Mindfulness to Medicine, Jon Kabat-Zinn writes “And that shift in your relationship with the experience gives you more degrees of freedom in your attitude and in your actions in a given situation, whatever it is . . . even if you don’t know what to do” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 89). By becoming aware of one’s moment-to-moment decisions, of one’s feelings and thoughts, one can step away from automatic reactions and towards thoughtful responses. This allows one the freedom and control to choose and guide the process, rather than be carried away unknowingly. In psychiatrist Viktor E. Frankl’s memoir, Man’s Search for Meaning (1959), Frankl suggests that suffering exists no matter what, and the goal is to recognize it and change your relationship with it in order

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

to move forward and live a meaningful life. He offers that stimulus is always present, and we will always have a response to it. But in-between the stimulus and the response is a moment, a pause, a space that provides one with the power to choose how to respond. He argues that it is in this “space” that lies one’s growth.

In order to maintain (and even learn) civility one must feel empowered to help others. If a law enforcement agent feels powerless to make decisions, or becomes internally blocked from doing so as a result of working from a bad habit, tolerance, kindness, and understanding will fall by the wayside only to be replaced with robotic type responses; black or white, yes or no, right or wrong, us or them.

### **Service Mentality**

A police officer / law enforcement agent must feel some sort of calling for the betterment of community to have continued success. According to Capps, “The internal desire to make the community better by protecting and serving should drive police applicants.” (2014, para. 13). The desire to make the community a better place through service can be an inherent trait that brings someone into law enforcement, but it can also be a trait that one can cultivate by practicing mindfulness.

In a recent study that looked at mindfulness compassion training, Lim, Condon, & DeSteno showed that participants who followed the mindfulness compassion training showed more compassion toward strangers versus those who did not have the training. The findings suggest that even “brief engagement in mindfulness meditation enhances compassionate behavior” (2015, p. 6). The study showed that after training, participants were more likely to engage in socially compassionate situations, like giving up their seat

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

to a stranger on the bus, compared to those who did not undergo mindfulness training.

Lim, Condon, & DeSteno note that, “These findings also point to the potential scalability of meditation as a technique for building a more compassionate society” (2015, p. 60).

The outcome of this study suggests that meditation enhances ones desire to engage in pro-social behaviors that benefit others. By training law enforcement personnel in compassion mindfulness, not only will it have lasting effects on those who already feel a call to serve, but it will also teach those who have not tapped into their compassionate side - thus positively affecting the public.

### **Humility**

Capps writes, “The proper degree of humility can help engender respect and trust from the public” (2015, para. 14). A humble person has the confidence to admit they are wrong and to be open to suggestions of other’s. And even more importantly someone who is humble has the confidence to ask questions, knowing they do not hold all the answers. A humble person is open-minded and is not filled with the desire to complicate things with ones own internal drive to blow a situation out of proportion.

Humility is yet one more by-product of mindfulness. Mindfulness teaches the concepts of simplicity, restraint and openness. Complicating things unnecessarily creates a blurred vision of real time occurrences. Bringing ones baggage, or preconceived notions to a crime scene for instance, might allow one to jump to unsupported conclusions. Training ones mind through mindfulness brings awareness to see what things are, as they really are.

Kabat-Zinn (2005) writes:

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

Meditation is not aimed at developing a fine philology of life or mind. It is not about thinking at all. It is about keeping things simple. Right now in this moment, do you see? Do you hear? This seeing, this hearing, when unadorned, is the recovery of original mind, free from all concepts, including “original mind.” And it is already here. It is already ours. Indeed, it is impossible to lose. (p.

40)

By approaching situations with a simple mind, meaning an open mind, one does not jump to preconceived ideas of what is occurring. The ability to approach things with a clear vision, and not be tied down to one’s ego or one’s arrogance, grants one the permission to ask questions rather than arrive with answers. Mindfulness cultivates an overall humility that encourages original thought; this in itself is a key component to generating and sustaining confidence from the public.

### **Controlled Temper**

When dealing with citizens who are in emotional turmoil, it is very important for a law enforcement agent to remain in control of their own emotions. This takes self-control and self-discipline, especially when trying to resolve heated conflicts. While some people are naturally calm, others require guidance in how to manage their emotions.

When in stressful situations, the brain typically processes by going into a fight or flight response cycle. According to Siegel, “Clusters of neurons in the brainstem also come into play when certain conditions seem to require a rapid mobilization of energy distribution throughout the body and brain. This so-called fight-flight-freeze array of responses is responsible for our survival at times of danger” (2010, p. 16). If one feels /

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

perceives they are in danger, they will respond accordingly. One's relationship with their emotions then determines the response. If one approaches a conflict with tension, the process continues and more tension is created; tension is met with more tension, stress is met with more stress, and anger is met with more anger. By decreasing one's stress level, they in effect take themselves out of the fight / flight cycle, and are then better able to react thoughtfully, thus defusing high tension situations. The goal is to reduce reactivity so one can then be open to whatever situation arises, instead of overreacting or not reacting at all. Mindfulness trains one to notice an experience as it is happening, thus enabling one to stop the energy from increasing to a point of losing one's temper. Siegel (2010) explains mindfulness as "a form of mental activity that trains the mind to become aware of awareness itself and to pay attention to one's own intention" (p. 86).

Mindfulness training helps to regulate emotions allowing one to take control of a situation with a calm demeanor. Training law enforcement personnel in mindfulness may lead to fewer temper control issues, and may lead to a positive desirable result for everyone involved.

### **Thirst for Knowledge**

Just like with most industries, law enforcement is fluid with a lot of moving parts. Laws change, policies change, and tactics change; there is always something new to learn. If one is not open to learning, their job will suffer. Creating space to allow the generation of new information is key to the thirst for knowledge. If focusing is an issue, new knowledge will never be sought. Tuning one's mind, teaching one's mind to focus, is at the core of mindfulness training.



## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

When one is overcome with thoughts or external distractions, often times it becomes hard to concentrate. When unable to concentrate, it becomes difficult to not only concentrate, but it also decreases one's desire to learn. When one is able to cultivate awareness, they come to realize that thoughts, or outside stimuli, can actually exist without becoming over consuming. Understanding this new way of relating to one's emotions and one's surroundings changes one's perception of what they can accomplish and what they can consume. This new created space allows for a flow of new information. This creates an environment within one's self which fosters growth and knowledge. Allowing oneself to get caught up in internal dialogue and outside distractions prevents any kind of stable focus or concentration (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 406). But if one can sit with the knowledge of what is occurring, one can then develop a desire for knowledge, and not become bogged down by the internal or external chaos that occurs. According to Kabat-Zinn (2005) "Dwelling here, in awareness, fully awake to the entire field of experience, however large or narrow we have set the lens, we readily observe that every aspect of experience comes and goes" (p. 234). When understanding that experience comes and goes, one then has the capacity and desire to replenish the flow of knowledge.

### **Success Story**

One success story is the Hillsboro police department in Oregon. According to Woolington (2014), Lieutenant Richard Goerling at the Hillsboro police department created a mindfulness program to create resiliency within the department. Goerling and the department are successfully using meditation training in 10 distinct ways: 1) to build

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

resiliency, 2) as a preventative mental health, 3) to improve wellness, 4) to improve community relations, 5) to improve job performance, 6) heal department issues, 7) to improve focus, 8) to find calm, 9) to relax, and 10) to be present in the moment. The Hillsboro department is actively conducting research on the implications of applying mindfulness, and they are hoping the research proves how mindfulness training can develop and nurture skills to enhance officer performance. As Lieutenant Goreling explains, “It’s our suffering that’s preventing us from being awake to ourselves and being awake to others, and having the capacity to muster any empathy when we deal with somebody in crisis.... The job takes away our ability to be empathic in that moment.” According to Goerling, the initial positive effects of the mindfulness program have been overwhelming, with more data available soon.

### **Current Mindfulness Training Availability for Law Enforcement**

There are multiple opportunities for anyone seeking mindfulness training, with new ones popping up every day: Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy, Mindful Schools (mindfulness for schools, teachers, and students), Mindful Therapy, and many more. Most trainings are based on an 8-week intervention, with some based on 6-week course work. There are also multiple retreats that offer mindfulness training: Spirit Rock, Insight Meditation Center, Shambhala Mountain Center, Inward Bound Mindfulness Education, Omega Institute, and many more. And finally universities such as Harvard, Georgetown, University of California, University of Sand Diego, and University of Massachusetts Medical School are offering courses and certificates in mindfulness, with one school (the first in the nation) offering a

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

Master's Degree in Mindfulness Studies, Lesley University. These programs all vary in what they provide, but most are based on MBSR training.

The Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program was developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979. There are over 200 medical centers around the world that teach the MBSR program. Although this program was originally taught in a medical facility for patients in pain, it has since been broadened and is now used for many other populations including: stressed, depressed, post traumatic stress, and those interested in cultivating awareness. This specific program is an 8-week program which meets weekly and systematically teaches a meditation program that includes: sitting meditation, walking meditation, body scans, and movement through yoga.

Mindfulness programs are evolving and are now being developed for specific populations. When researching programs that exist only a handful pop up that are specifically geared towards first responders. These programs are typically off site and are applied as immersions (retreat style), 8-week, or 6-week format:

1. Ottawa Mindfulness Clinic: 8-week mindfulness class called “Operational Stress Injury (M4-OSI),” designed for First Responders (police, paramedics, firefighters) and active and veteran military members diagnosed with PTSD. Referrals can be made through the members’ occupational health services. Dr. Musten and Dr. Monteiro are Blue Cross Service Providers and registered with the National Defence Medical Centre and RCMP. (<https://ottawamindfulnessclinic.com/>)
2. Resilience Immersion Training: Mindfulness for First Responders – 4-day

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

immersion program. The intention of this retreat-style immersion training is to introduce first responders to the power and potential of mindfulness practice for transforming their work through reconnecting them to their deepest intentions that drew them to the field in the first place. (<http://mbpti.org/resilience-immersion-training-mindfulness-immersion-training-for-first-responders/#registration>)

3. Center For Mindfulness in Corrections: Training programs include basic Mindfulness Training (MT), Mindfulness-Based Emotional Intelligence (MBEI) training and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) training for corrections professionals, including both non-uniformed and uniformed personnel, as well as probation & parole officers and community corrections managers and line staff. (<http://mindfulcorrections.org/mindfulness/>)
4. The Center for Mindfulness & Justice: provides non-sectarian mindfulness instruction, keynote presentations, and organizational consulting and training for criminal justice professionals and employees in all arenas. (<http://www.mindfulnessandjustice.org/>)

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

### **Mind the Gap**

A need exists to create preventative care programs that train to decrease stress and increase wellbeing for those working in law enforcement. According to Johnson et al., “The ability to quickly anticipate, respond to, and recover from recurrent stressors is fundamental to a healthy homeostatic system and essential for long-term behavioral and psychological health” (2014, p. 844). Being able to recognize potential stress states, with the aid of mindfulness programs, is a crucial step in managing one’s health. And while there are currently mindfulness programs available for law enforcement, these programs are not being implemented on an in department basis.

### **The gap**

In order to provide mindfulness training to the greatest number of first responders, existing approaches / models must change: Rather than having first responders seek out mindfulness immersion programs, mindfulness programs must be designed around the working conditions of first responders.

Most the aforementioned programs are either 1) 4 to 6 day immersions (retreat style), or 2) 6 to 8 week classes at one or two hour duration (off work site). Neither approaches are considered official job training for first responders, so it is up to the first responder to not only seek out such training, but also make time for it. With the Immersion approach, the officer has to 1) request time off and 2) pay for immersion program out of their own pocket. Option 2, the 6 or 8 week class, does not fit easily into the first responder “shift work” model. First responders typically work 10 to 12 hour shifts, a few days in a row, then they have off a few days (it differs depending on the

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

department). An inconsistent work schedule leaves no room for going to a consistently meeting (weekly) class. Again, this approach would require non-paid time off of work on top of the scheduling issue.

Access to mindfulness training is limited for first responders. While each field (i.e. fire, police, probation, etc) does have required continue education hours, each department has different standard requirements; some require yearly classes, other require bi yearly re-training hours. In order for a mindfulness program to be applied across the largest group of first responders, specifically those working in law enforcement, it should be provided either as part of the initial academy basic training, or as Mandatory Re-Training (MRT) hours provided by individual departments.

A gap currently exists not just between what is needed and what is offered, but more specifically what is available and the mechanism for offering. It is this delta – the ability to provide the program in a manner that is accessible – that is the roadblock for mindfulness training for first responders; to be both pervasive and successful. One way to close this gap is to change the current mainstream approach to teaching mindfulness. If a program can receive approval by the Department of Justice Services (who approves all training programs for law enforcement agency's), and the training can fit within the framework of approved “mandatory” training or re-training hours, then possibly the majority of law enforcement personal would be able to have access to proven mindfulness programs that will decrease stress and increase their overall perceived wellbeing.

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

### **Methods**

The methods were designed by delivering various structures / approaches and evaluating effectiveness. What didn't work was taken out, and what worked was refined. What seemed valuable was then expanded upon to create an original session. The session was then developed further with the outcome of creating an original mindfulness workshop that included pre and post data collection.

### **The Beginning: What Didn't Work**

A significant amount of peer-reviewed research exists on mindfulness programs, most with validated beneficial outcomes. Looking at established mindfulness programs, I initially approached my research using the previously proven mindfulness methodologies. Using these as a guide I designed a strategy to offer an 8-week mindfulness intervention series to law enforcement agencies. I identified a department that would be receptive, the Alexandria Virginia's Sheriff's department, and began courting them. I informed them that I was working on my thesis, and asked if I could come in and do complimentary mindfulness training. I explained that the goal was to recruit deputies and ask them to attend an 8-week mindfulness workshop. After many meetings I received approval and was asked to come in and do an in-person introduction to all the deputies, and send a follow up email with an explanation of what I was doing. The face-to-face introduction was conducted during "roll call." Roll call occurs at the beginning of each shift and informs the next shift what occurred on the previous shift and also gives an overview of what to expect on the upcoming shift. The Sheriff's deputies and lieutenants work 12-hour shifts and in order to introduce myself to the entire team, I attended 4 roll calls.

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

Four different teams cover 4 different shifts: A Team a.m, A Team p.m, B Team a.m. and B Team p.m.

I anticipated some push back on getting volunteers, so wanted to go in as informed as possible. Before attending roll call, I researched how best to approach this population. Considering I was not a first responder I decided to reach out to some experts. I interviewed a few people who were currently in law enforcement and had worked in some capacity with mindfulness. One officer was very forthcoming with his guidance and offered the following: “Just go in and quickly get to the point and start meditating. But only for three minutes, no longer. They can’t handle it. And make sure you play background music. They need the distraction.” I was told to keep things very basic. I was told that police officers / deputies are basic people and would not want to understand the theories of mindfulness or even how the brain works. While I appreciated the officer’s time, I did not feel comfortable approaching a group of people with preconceived ideas of what they can and cannot handle.

I then spoke to an FBI agent who gave me some advice on the law enforcement industry as a whole, and indicated that this is a hard population to penetrate. He reinforced that my lack of law enforcement training decreased my credibility and would make it very difficult for me to engage. He also said I should consider writing a book to make myself more credible. I interviewed a few more police officers and basically got the same message: you are not one of us so you won’t prevail. I continued to pursue contacts (referrals from referrals) and in doing so came across a training program that was specifically “mindfulness for first responders.” Unfortunately when I inquired about



## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

this immersion program I was told I could not attend because I was not a first responder.

When it was time to go back to my identified law enforcement agency, I attended the 4 roll call's and introduced myself as a mindfulness studies graduate candidate, but not a first responder. However, I was able to draw from my background as being raised by two first responders, and used that angle as my "in" to relatedness. It was not exactly what the experts advised, but it was the only authentic way to open the introduction and begin recruiting for my study. The 4 roll call meetings lead to 25 potential volunteers. I booked a room at the Sheriff's office and started an 8-week mindfulness program. In order to accommodate every shift, I scheduled a morning class and an evening class (both on the same day) 2 times per week. Each potential volunteer gave me his or her email address and I sent emails with relevant information. (See Appendix A for sample email).

### **Original Session**

For 4 weeks I met with deputies at the Sheriff's office. Some days no one would show up, other days I would have 2 or 3 people. We went over mindfulness concepts and theories as they relate to neuroplasticity, stimulus & response, amygdala, parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous system, mindsight, Buddha, comfort zones, aversion, and we did a lot of meditation. Of the volunteers who came, each one was completely engaged, never bored, never pushed back on the research and always welcomed the meditation component. The information was life changing (their words) for most of the group

Through conversations with high-level employees in the Training Departments at both the Sheriffs office and the Police department, I began to develop my second approach. If I could get the program approved by the Department of Justice Services

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

(DCJS), as an official training course, I could turn the workshop into a mandatory training for the departments, which would assure attendance. I was referred to a contact at the DCJS and I reached out a few times via email and on-line forms. Unfortunately this path did not work. I never heard back even after multiple attempts. Example email:

### **Development of Program**

I changed courses once again and reached out to the training officer at the Sheriff's office. We collaborated on a new approach and she asked that I create a curriculum that she would then submit to the DCJS as a pilot program workshop. This program was approved and I was able to lead a 2-hour workshop on Mindfulness to about 30 deputies. At the same time, I reached out to some first responders in both Los Angeles and in Alexandria and conducted 2 more workshops, using the below designed curriculum, collecting data from another 10 subjects. (See Appendix B for Curriculum.)

### **Mindfulness Training Immersion Workshop**

The Mindfulness Training Immersion Workshop is two hours in duration, and includes an education component, four different meditations, and a situational applications component. This is a high level introduction to both the science and application of mindful meditation. The goal of this study was to see if a mindfulness workshop could decrease stress for those working in law enforcement. In order to evaluate this, I looked at before workshop self perceived stress, and after workshop self perceived stress levels. (See Appendix C for Perceived Stress Scale by Sheldon Cohen)

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

### **Workshop Structure**

At the onset of the workshop, all subjects fill out the stress scale. I collected the stress questionnaire form, as well as the consent form, and then began the 2-hour PPT presentation / workshop. I started the session by addressing misconceptions of mindfulness: blank mind, only for Buddhists, “some hippie thing people do”, etc. The workshop continued by demystifying mindfulness with very specific definitions, including various published studies. The workshop ended with real time / real scenario based applications, i.e., how to apply mindfulness in stressful occurrences like road rage, co-worker drama, family issues, high trauma situations, etc.

The workshop is broken up by interspersed meditations. I begin with a simple breathing exercise, “Finding your Breath,” where we learn to follow our breath and come back to it when the mind wanders. Half way through the workshop I do a “Listening Meditation” where we focus our attention on sounds. Three quarters of the way through we do a “Body Scan,” sometimes laying down, sometimes sitting in a chair, and sometimes standing. And finally we do a “Guided Meditation” while listening to a poem on habits. When the meditation is completed I ask the participants to write for 5 minutes with the following prompt: List your 5 top stressors, and using mindfulness as a guide, write down some ideas on how to move away from “reacting” and towards “responding” to stressors.

The workshop ends by discussing how we move forward. I provide a hand out on strategies to incorporate meditation and mindfulness into daily life over the next 3 to 4 weeks (see below).

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

### **Daily Practice is Essential (practice – practice – practice)**

#### **Strategy Week 1**

##### Morning – Focused Awareness

- 5 minutes – Breathing; when mind wanders, simply notice and bring awareness back to your breath, notice where you are breathing, be curious

##### Afternoon – practice choice-less awareness

- 5 minutes - Let your mind wander, following your thoughts

##### Night – Body Scan

- In bed, begin with your feet, on exhale, soften. Slowly move up your legs, sensing and softening each muscle, bone, tendon, etc. When mind wanders, simply guide back to body part and continue where you left off.

#### **Strategy Week 2**

##### Morning – Focused Awareness

- 10 minutes – Breathing; when mind wanders, simply notice and bring awareness back to your breath, notice where you are breathing, be curious

##### Afternoon – practice choice-less awareness

- 5 minutes - Let your mind wander, following your thoughts

##### Night – Body Scan

- In bed, begin with your feet, on exhale, soften. Slowly move up your legs, sensing and softening each muscle, bone, tendon, etc. When mind wanders, simply guide back to body part and continue where you left off.

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

### Strategy Week 3

#### Morning – Focused Awareness

- 30 minutes – Breathing; when mind wanders, simply notice and bring awareness back to breath

#### Afternoon – Body Scan or Walking Meditation

- 5 minutes – Stand; sense feet on ground, move up the body, sensing different body parts, notice where you feel any tension and soften with the exhale
- 5 minutes – Walking meditation

#### Night – Body Scan

- In bed, begin with your feet, on exhale, soften. Slowly move up your legs, sensing and softening each muscle, bone, tendon, etc. When mind wanders, simply guide back to body part and continue where you left off.

### Conclusion of Workshop

After the workshop concluded, I discussed different ways to research and access mindfulness information; books, apps, guided meditations on line, etc. I then gather contact information and let the subject know I will follow up in about 4 weeks with a post workshop stress scale questionnaire that they will fill out and send back to me via email. (See Appendix D for 4 Week Follow Up Email.)

### Questionnaire Data Collection

Because the study is anonymous I have attributed a number to each participant, and used this number when collecting and providing results. All data collected from the stress surveys is connected to the assigned number, and then populated in an excel

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

spreadsheet. The data collected indicates how each participant responded to each survey question. “Pre” indicates the pre workshop self perceived stress numbers, and “Post” shows the post workshop (about 4 weeks later) self perceived stress numbers. Each line (pre and post) is calculated individually based on the stress survey instructions as follows: scores are obtained by reversing responses (e.g., 0 = 4, 1 = 3, 2 = 2, 3 = 1 & 4 = 0) to the four positively stated items (items 4, 5, 7, & 8 which are highlighted yellow) and summing across all scale items (using the reversed numbers only for 4, 5, 7, & 8).

The scores calculated for both pre and post are compared to one another with a resulting number showing the delta. The delta numbers are labeled “Final Number” and are provided in the last column of the excel spreadsheet. The calculated score shows self-perceived stress after the workshop as either: 1) the same, 2) increased, or 3) decreased. A positive number in the final column shows a decrease in self-perceived stress, and a negative number shows an increase in self perceived stress. A second section, labeled “comments” is included on the spreadsheet, and is part of the anonymous data collection.

### **Discussion**

The amount of data collected for this study had some limitations based on participation. Of the data collected, qualitative and quantitative analysis was possible. Emerging questions were produced and future study next steps were formed.

### **Limitations of These Studies**

Of the 25 volunteers who signed up for the “Original Session,” about six actually made it to one or more classes. Those that attended seemed to benefit, but it soon became clear that it was difficult to get the deputies to stay for an extra 30 minutes at the end of

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

their shift. When I asked why the people thought there was a low turnout, the deputies explained that no one wanted to come in before their shift, and no one wanted to come in on their day off. And after working a 12-hour shift, they were tired and just wanted to go home. As the weeks progressed, and the numbers continued to dwindle, I stopped the program at 4 weeks and went back to the drawing board. This is when I realized a workshop approach would be better. The Mindfulness Training Immersion Workshop, presented as an in-house concentrated 2-hour session ( time to receive MIR - mandatory in-service retraining – hours) proved to be limited in its reach. This was provided as a voluntary class, so only those that needed MIR hours and were interested in the topic took the workshop.

### **Commentary Findings**

After a few sessions of the “Original Session,” I had at least four different deputies come to me (on separate occasions) to tell me how mindfulness had already helped their lives. One woman explained how situations with her roommate typically escalated to shouting matches. During one specific incident, the roommate did something she did not like, but instead of losing her cool, which was her go to reaction, she actively chose to walk into her room, lie down and focus on her breath. Because it was after her work day, she ended up falling asleep. She slept for the entire night and woke in the morning to realize she hadn’t taken her sleeping pills (she typically takes her sleeping pills every night). She was amazed that this was the first time she slept through the night without a sleeping aid. A second subject described how - because of our sessions - he was able to recognize his anger in the middle of an altercation with an inmate. He said he was able to

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

take a breath in the middle of a chokehold and then step away (while still subduing him). He said his initial desire was to start punching the inmate even after he subdued him, but he was able to stop himself. A third woman explained how she was getting frustrated with her kids and instead of yelling at them - she took a breath and started talking in a less aggressive voice. She said her kids thought she was going crazy because she was so calm! And a fourth person said he was so happy to be able to talk freely (he happened to be the only one that showed up that night) regarding the fact that he does feel sad and depressed sometimes. He expressed that when he is around his co-workers in the department, it is ok to have anger, but not ok to feel sad. He indicated that sadness is not a manly emotion. He said it was great to have the instructions during meditation to not judge his emotions and in effect calm his sadness.

### **Data Findings**

Results were gathered from a pre and post applied self-perceived survey's, as well as general feedback / comments based on the mindfulness workshop itself. Interviews and written commentary concerning the Mindfulness Training Immersion Workshop include the following: After a module regarding the different ways to breathe, one officer commented, "Breathing exercises, I loved the training exercise and the detail info of why we stress and where it is derived from." When reflecting on how it felt to actually meditate, one participant explained "The meditation exercises, while it should be simple it's not, I found myself having to center myself numerous times throughout the exercise," and another explained, "The meditation exercise and how to be more mindful as a law enforcement officer." One deputy, when asked what worked, summed up the entire



## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

workshop, “Everything.” When answering questions regarding what was effective, one participant wrote, “The involvement of the students physically experiencing the effects of relaxing the mind and body,” and another replied, “We were shown how to relax our minds and body in a way that I thought was not possible.” One subject explained, “It made me aware of how stressed I really was and how to focus on me instead of everything else.” When asked for feedback on the overall workshop, one officer wrote, “Great idea to introduce this class to Law Enforcement.” When asked about implementing these concepts and tools into every day life, one subject wrote, “I have told myself in the last month to take deep breaths and relax when some stress or anger did arise and I felt it does help soothe and relax me.”

Results from the pre and post questionnaire are as follows: 3 subjects showed a slight increase in stress, 0 subjects showed the same level of stress, and 9 subjects showed a decrease in stress in the post survey (see Table 1).

### **Analysis**

Results suggest that implementing a mindfulness workshop for those working in law enforcement may decrease self-perceived stress over a 4-6 week period. Of the participants who showed a decrease in stress, at the high-end one participant went from a score of 24 to 13, and at the low end one participant went from 16 to 15 (see Table 1). Overall results show an average 4-point increase in overall stress reduction (see Table 2). Commentary results suggest that after the workshop subjects felt the information would benefit them and felt the effects not only immediately following the training, but also saw continued benefits over the following 4 – 6 weeks.

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

While there were 3 subjects who had a slight increase in self-perceived stress (the final number decreased by 2 in each case) this may be an outcome of situational awareness. The workshop taught participants to bring awareness to mind states, specifically it taught how to notice when an emotion arises. The officer's who showed an increase in stress may not of had this awareness prior to the workshop and thus may not have been aware of their emotions / mind state.

### **Emerging Questions**

In regards to the three officers who had an increase in self-perceived stress, the following question arose: Did the training increase one's actual awareness of self-perceived stress? In other words, is it possible that these subjects felt more stress after the workshop simply because they were now more aware of their feelings and state of mind? Moving forward it would beneficial to look at pre- and post- analyses of one's ability to not only assess if their stress has increased or decreased, but also analyze one's ability to actually perceive their stress in general.

### **Next Steps**

Looking deeper into the lives and stress levels of first responders, in particular police officers will enable the production of training programs to develop and improve stress management skills. Without these tools we will continue to witness high stress levels among those working in law enforcement. We will continue to see cycles of violence, reactivity, and cruelty toward not only the public, but also inwards, towards the officers themselves. More studies should be conducted not only on implementing mindfulness tools, but also creating system wide changes that would incorporate these

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

skills on an ongoing basis within the departments. In order to teach first responders how to create and maintain a sense of well-being, they must first be taught how to decrease habitual responses, and create new healthy habits. By incorporating mindfulness into their daily lives those working in law enforcement will have better access to emotional regulation and impulse control issues, thus decreasing stress and decreasing anxiety.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of the present study was to look at the stresses involved in working in law enforcement, how mindfulness practices reduce stress across multiple populations, the barriers that exist in bringing mindfulness to law enforcement, and applying an original mindfulness program to a sample of active-duty law enforcement officers, deputies and victim units. The research question posed was: “Can mindfulness immersion training increase overall perceived wellness by decreasing stress and anxiety in those working in law enforcement?” The implementation of an original workshop “Mindfulness Training to First Responders,” proved to have some benefit. It informed the participants on how to recognize a stressor, what occurs during stressful moments, and how to change a behavior from reactive to responsive.

Data results suggest that a workshop is only the beginning. When encountering daily stressors, especially traumatic and life threatening events, dealing with stress and stressful emotions becomes increasingly more difficult to handle. As such, without any emotional regulation training, those working in law enforcement tend to burn out, which often leads to a crash in the form of depression and/or anxiety. Using mindfulness to take the automatic response out of the equation leaves room for thoughtful and purposeful

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

inquiry. It is going to require progressive thinking, more research, and incredible courage to implement a strategy such as a mindfulness training program. Results from this study suggest that law enforcement agencies would benefit and the effects could be revolutionary. Having the ability to positively change the brain is important for everyone, and especially essential for those in high-trauma / high-chaos jobs whose job it is to ensure the safety and wellness of our communities.

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

**Appendix A**

## Sample Email #1 &amp; #2

Hello Everyone,

We are meeting tomorrow @ 6:45pm to begin the Mindfulness Pilot program. Thank you once again for signing up.

No need to bring anything - just come to Roll Call #2 and I will be there.

As I mentioned, each session will only be about 30 minutes. We will meet 1 day a week - flipping Tuesday / Thursday - for a total of 6 weeks. Sessions will be held in Roll Call #2 - directly after your shift.

Please note the following dates on your calendar:

**Who:** TEAM A (AM)

**Date:** April 19th, 28th, May 3rd, 12th, 17th, 26th

**Time:** 6:45pm

**Location:** Roll Call #2

Please click the link below to let me know you are coming (just say "yes" in subject line).

ps - I will be at the department every Tuesday and Thursday (6:45am and 6:45pm) for the next 7 weeks. It would be great if you could make all your scheduled sessions - but you can also attend the others as well. These sessions DO NOT need to be taken in order - so feel free to pop into any of them.

Thank you,

Gina Rollo White

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

## Sample Email #2:

All,

Gina White will be holding Mindfulness sessions every Tuesday and Thursday at 6:45am & 6:45pm - starting THIS week (Gina sent out emails to everyone interested but received some bounced back email's.) Stop by after your shift - sessions last only about 30 mins. If you miss a class - no worries. You can drop into any class - no need to attend them in any order (in other words - each class stands alone and is not dependent on the previous class).

**Mindfulness in Roll Call 2**

Tuesday's @ 6:45am & 6:45pm

Thursday's @ 6:45am & 6:45pm

Thank you

Gina Rollo White

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

**Appendix B**

Curriculum Submitted to DCJS

Alexandria, VA Sheriffs Office Mindfulness Resiliency Training

Stress Management Training; re-training the brain, through neuroplasticity, to recognize and respond to real time mind states

INSTRUCTOR: Gina White, Mindfulness Educator

DATE PREPARED: 10-11-16

CLASS LENGTH/TIME ALLOTTED: 2 hours

REFERENCES/MATERIALS:

A multi-method examination of the effects of mindfulness on stress attribution coping, and emotional well-being.

Effects of mindfulness on psychological health: A review of empirical studies

Coming to our Senses - John Kabat-Zinn

Mindsight - Dr. Dan Siegel

INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS USED: Lecture / Guided Group Discussion

VISUAL AIDS USED:

Power Point

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

### REQUIRED TRAINING MATERIALS:

Handouts on terminology, Handouts on studies,

PP screen and projector

### STUDENT MATERIALS NEEDED:

Pen/Pencil, Paper

PERFORMANCE OUTCOME: Cultivate skills for mind state regulation, stress

management, situational awareness, post adverse situational attunement, positive

co-worker relations, response vs reactive modeling

### TRAINING OBJECTIVE:

By the end of the course, the students will be able to

- Increase on the job effectiveness
  
- Increase / reinforce healthy mind states
  
- Develop leadership skills



## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

- Decrease burnout

### INTRODUCTION (Credentials/background of Instructor)

#### **Gina White - Certified Mindfulness Instructor**

Masters Degree Candidate of Mindfulness Studies at Lesley University

Professional Certificate in Mindfulness from the

University of California Berkeley

Training Certificate from MindfulSchools

#### **Objectives:** (clarify expectations/outcomes of the class)

By the end of this class, you will be able to:

1. Identify mind states (and stressors)
2. Self regulate mind states
3. Neutralize mind states
4. Fine tune awareness
5. Reduce stress
6. Increase sleep
7. Increase overall wellness

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

### 8. Improve leadership skills

#### **Motivational Statement:**

This course provides training to “re-wire” brain activity through neuroplasticity. Stimuli (including stress) is always present, but how one engages with it can vary. Learn specific tools to *respond* to daily stimulus rather than *react* from previously learned habits. Most people have not learned the skills necessary to navigate the stressors of daily life, let alone the high stress encounters of on the job interactions. Learn to become aware of what triggers the mind and what settles the mind. This class will teach you skills to move away from reacting out of habit, and move you towards responding from a place of knowledge. Improve wellbeing (physical health and mental health), achieve balance and resiliency at work and at home, recognize and change habitual reactions, respond more effectively to complex or difficult situations, observe without criticism or judgment, be present, in this moment, right now.

#### Mindfulness Resiliency Training to Bring Real Time Awareness to Mind States

##### A. What is Mindfulness Resiliency

- Identifying Mind States
- Functions of the brain
- How habits are formed
- Mindfulness Overview

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

### B. Fight / Flight response

- Amygdala function
- Chemical reaction in body

### C. Dr. Dan Siegel / Model of brain

- Brain disconnect - Flipping lid
- Wheel of awareness

### D. Tools for Mindfulness Resiliency / Mind State Regulation

- Neuroplasticity
- Name it to tame it
- Neurons that wire together - fire together

### E. Breakout sessions

- Breathing exercise
- Mind state regulation exercise
- Focused awareness exercise
- Mindful Movement exercise

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

**Appendix C**

## Perceived Stress Scale

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) is the most widely used psychological instrument for measuring the perception of stress. It is a measure of the degree to which situations in one's life are appraised as stressful. Items were designed to tap how unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded respondents find their lives. The scale also includes a number of direct queries about current levels of experienced stress. The PSS was designed for use in community samples with at least a junior high school education. The items are easy to understand, and the response alternatives are simple to grasp. Moreover, the questions are of a general nature and hence are relatively free of content specific to any subpopulation group. The questions in the PSS ask about feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, respondents are asked how often they felt a certain way.

Evidence for Validity: Higher PSS scores were associated with (for example):  
 · failure to quit smoking

· failure among diabetics to control blood sugar levels

· greater vulnerability to stressful life-event elicited depressive symptoms · more colds

Health status relationship to PSS: Cohen et al. (1988) show correlations with PSS and:

Stress Measures, Self- Reported Health and Health Services Measures, Health Behavior Measures, Smoking Status, Help Seeking Behavior.

Temporal Nature: Because levels of appraised stress should be influenced by daily

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

hassles, major events, and changes in coping resources, predictive validity of the PSS is expected to fall off rapidly after four to eight weeks.

Scoring: PSS scores are obtained by reversing responses (e.g., 0 = 4, 1 = 3, 2 = 2, 3 = 1 & 4 = 0) to the four positively stated items (items 4, 5, 7, & 8) and then summing across all scale items. A short 4 item scale can be made from questions 2, 4, 5 and 10 of the PSS 10 item scale.

Norm Groups: L. Harris Poll gathered information on 2,387 respondents in the U.S. Norm Table for the PSS 10 item inventory

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### **Perceived Stress Scale**

The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, you will be asked to indicate by circling how often you felt or thought a certain way.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_ Gender (Circle): M F Other \_\_\_\_\_

### References

0 = Never 1 = Almost Never 2 = Sometimes 3 = Fairly Often 4 = Very Often

1. In the last month, how often have you been upset  
because of something that happened unexpectedly? .....

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life? .....
3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and “stressed”? .....
4. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems? .....
5. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?.....
6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do? .....
7. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life? .....
8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?..
9. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control?.....

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

10. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties  
were piling up so high that you could not overcome them? .....

Mind Garden, Inc. [info@mindgarden.com](mailto:info@mindgarden.com) [www.mindgarden.com](http://www.mindgarden.com)

The PSS Scale is reprinted with permission of the American Sociological Association,  
from Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., and Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived  
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## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

**Appendix D**

## 4-Week Follow Up Email

Hello X,

Thank you again for attending the Mindfulness Training Workshop in X. I can't thank you enough for supporting my research on the effects of mindfulness on First Responders. As I mentioned, I am gathering data (anonymous) from over 20 First Responders (deputies, officers, victims assistance, etc) for my thesis - Bringing Mindfulness to First Responders.

It has been about a month since our workshop, and, for my research, I need to assess the impact - if any - of the workshop on you.

Below is the same self-perceived stress survey you filled during our session. Please fill it out again, and email me your answers. I will compare your before and after results, and I will share them with you if you want. Please feel free to add additional comments at the end of the survey.

I hope that you found our sessions beneficial, and I hope that you are seeing some continued benefit!

Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you.

Gina Rollo White



## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

## Tables

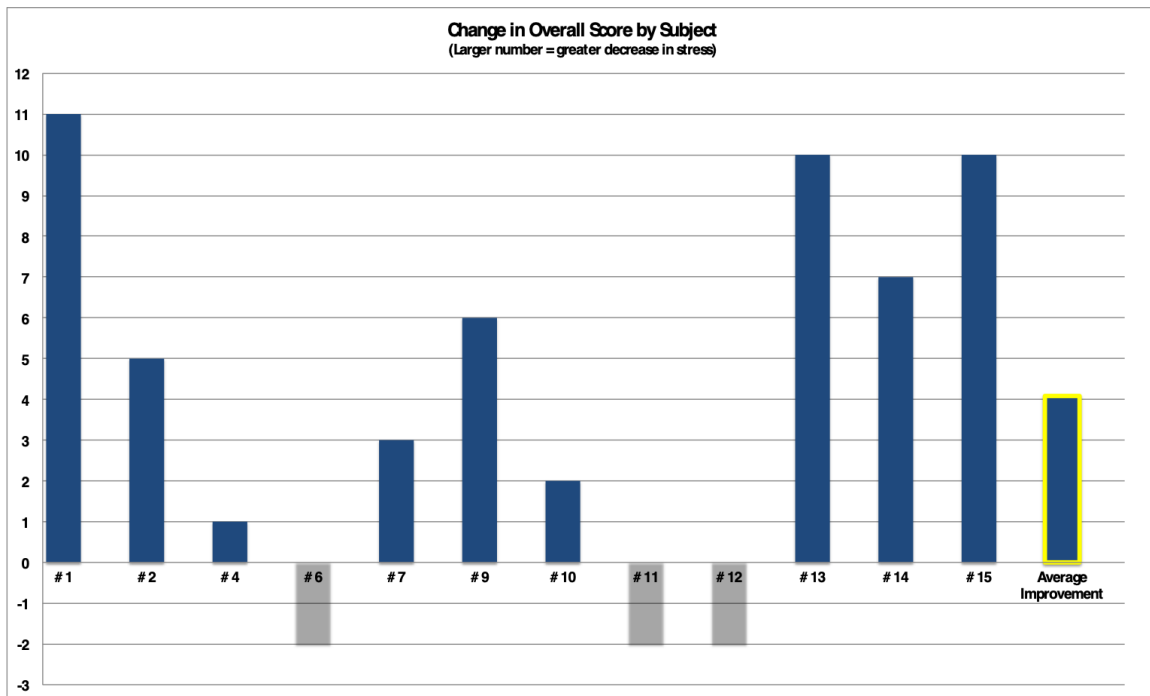
Table 1: Pre and Post Questionnaire Numbers

Subject		Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Score	Change in Score
# 1	Pre	3	2	4	2	2	2	2	2	4	1	24	11
	Post	2	2	2	1	2	0	1	1	1	1	13	
# 2	Pre	2	2	3	1	1	1	2	1	3	1	17	5
	Post	2	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	0	12	
# 4	Pre	2	2	2	0	1	2	2	1	2	2	16	1
	Post	2	2	2	0	1	1	2	1	2	2	15	
# 6	Pre	1	0	2	0	2	0	0	1	1	0	7	-2
	Post	2	1	1	0	2	0	0	1	2	0	9	
# 7	Pre	3	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	10	3
	Post	3	0	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	7	
# 9	Pre	2	3	2	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	16	6
	Post	2	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	2	1	10	
# 10	Pre	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	15	2
	Post	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	13	
# 11	Pre	2	2	3	2	1	0	2	1	1	0	14	-2
	Post	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	2	2	2	16	
# 12	Pre	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	-2
	Post	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	4	
# 13	Pre	2	4	3	1	2	1	2	1	2	2	20	10
	Post	1	4	2	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	10	
# 14	Pre	1	2	1	1	0	1	2	1	2	1	12	7
	Post	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	5	

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

# 15	Pre	4	0	4	0	1	0	2	0	4	0	15	10
	Post	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	5	

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

**Table 2: Change in Overall Score by Subject**

## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

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## MINDFULNESS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

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