



Asken provides solid and evidentiary research to display the desperate need for psychological skills training and the positive impact this training can have on the longevity and duration of one's police career.

MindSighting: Mental Toughness Skills for Police Officers in High Stress Situations

BY MICHAEL ASKEN

REVIEWED BY LYNDSEY SEELA

“Be mentally tough.” “Mental toughness is key to a successful, healthy career.” “You are going to see a lot in this career and in order to survive you have to have mental toughness.” Although these are agreeable statements, they are broad and without context. It is necessary for police officers to have “mental toughness,” yet training for it is rarely integrated in law enforcement

curriculums around the country. So the question remains, how does one become mentally tough?

The popular answer is, experience. Experience will help officers become mentally tough. Yet, what happens when day one comes for a new officer, and their first call is for a fatal crash? Experience is not there to help with emotional awareness and processing skills, nor does it assist

with providing productive training in mental toughness. The officer, more than likely, will get through the call, complete their tangible policy-required tasks, and go home or move on to the next call. This begins the journey of emotional detachment, which is not to be confused with mental toughness. Experience is clearly important, but law enforcement may need to stop leaning on experience as

the end-all be-all, as generations of newer officers continue to evolve.

In “MindSighting,” Dr. Michael Asken provides an alternative answer to tangible training for mental toughness. Early on he writes, “... the mind and body are intertwined, interact and need to function in synchrony for optimal mental toughness.” This short statement sets the groundwork as he addresses the predictable and unpredictable stressors in policing and the negative effects they have on one’s physical and psychological being.

He begins with “maintaining personal equipment” and the disastrous combination of shift work, sleep deprivation, and performance enhancing drugs or other substances. The physical and psychological effects associated with this combination, especially over time, can be life threatening and detrimental to life outside work and after retirement. Asken addresses the inevitable fatigue in policing and discusses various micro solutions.

The reader becomes fully cognizant of Asken’s passion and concern for officers, which allows the reader to be more open and trusting as new topics are introduced throughout the book. For example, he devotes a chapter to physical conditioning and states he wants to bring awareness to the body because, “It is your basic piece of equipment. It needs attention, care, and conditioning.”

The importance of exercise and functional conditioning, although not the main purpose of this book, is also discussed and encouraged to help combat the side effects of policing stressors. “MindSighting” does not deny the power of physical fitness; it heavily encourages it and brings light to the additional trainable psychological skills that can help officers reach their goals or lower the side effects of the inevitable outcomes of the policing career.

Prior to introducing psychological skills, Asken writes two vital chap-

ters connecting the reader to their personal performance levels, how to up-regulate and down-regulate during a call, and to the physiological responses to stress and fear. This information normalizes the brain’s responses in low stress and high stress situations. Specifically, he creates a space where officers can understand the negative effects of fear and how fear can signal them to be ready for the call. The idea of fear being a tool is not often addressed but rather shamed; however, it plays a large role as police officers, aka humans, respond to unthinkable situations.

After meticulously explaining the aforementioned information, Asken presents the psychological tools to match the stressors. The discussion of self-regulation strategies helps officers become more self-aware and provides tangible ways to relax or activate the body and mind’s response levels. The validity lies in the research as always, but also in the numerous quotes presented by officers and other military personnel throughout “MindSighting.” This book portrays pockets of endless research on psychological skills and their effects. Examples include: centering, the act of narrowing focus and attention, which can help with mood on a long shift; and progressive muscle relaxation, the act of bringing awareness to one’s body.

Another intriguing and valid topic presented is the contrast between the classic OODA Loop and Asken’s police officer specific adjustment to it, called the “AAADA Loop.” This starts the conversation around concentration and the false notion that the ability to concentrate is not a trained technique. He provides a short active concentration exercise for the reader and indirectly proves that when the situation becomes more difficult, concentration naturally fades. He then provides a more tangible exercise to turn the small activity into reality-based concentration training. This is yet another area that shows the intentionality and

specificity that “MindSighting” is written for police officers.

Asken concludes by discussing two psychological skills: self-talk and negative thought stopping. It is as if this was the lasting thought he wanted to leave with his readers. Words matter and the words officers speak to themselves (out loud and/or internally) matter even more.

Law enforcement is a physically, mentally and emotionally demanding career. Police officers are witness to the most unthinkable and immeasurable human behaviors and incidents. One week on the job can include calls for deceased individuals, ejected fatality crashes, and horrific child abuse cases. And yet, mental skills training and mental preparedness rarely find its way into mandatory training hours. Asken provides solid and evidentiary research to display the desperate need for psychological skills training and the positive impact this training can have on the longevity and duration of one’s police career. This is a must-read for officers and also for law enforcement personnel that have direct impact on the development of law enforcement curriculum and training.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lyndsey Seela is a police officer at the Green Bay (WI) Police Department, and previously worked as a police officer for the Madison Police Department, where she was a mental health liaison, domestic violence liaison and peer support officer. She is founder and owner of Seela Performance LLC, a mental skills training company that aims to help athletes and first responders grow to a new level of self-awareness, gain further intention with their strengths and values, and incorporate evidence-based mental preparedness training. She has her master’s degree in sport and performance psychology from the University of Denver.