



10 TIPS TO KEEP YOUR MIND SHARP

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A career in law enforcement can be one of the most satisfying, but also one of the most demanding of career choices. As what was once a job has evolved into a profession, the public perception, while still trailing the reality, is of a much more highly qualified individual. Riley, the Irish cop, hired because he was brawny enough to handle the toughs at the local bar, was replaced by Joe Friday, with his terse “just the facts, ma’am”. Television programs have played a large part in the growth of respect for the police profession, but shows like CSI have also caused some to think of cops as miracle workers, solving every crime with DNA evidence. The more recent advent of reality shows like COPS, has done much to portray the average beat cop in a more realistic light. That being said, it is inevitable that some cops will play to the camera, knowing they will be on TV. Even with all of the exposure on television, the public only has a cursory understanding of what it is like to be a cop. The recent college grad may still look down his nose at the uniformed cop as uneducated, when even those cops without degrees have to know a plethora of laws at the state, county, and municipal levels; every year the landscape changes, and every cop needs to stay abreast of recent federal and state supreme court decisions in order to prevent a good case from being thrown out of court on a technicality. Having in many ways outperformed the public that they serve, the average cop needs to know what a “presumptive test” is, and how to pronounce “presumptive” in court, while the public he or she serves doesn’t even have the word “presumptive” in their vocabulary.

Most law enforcement officers love their jobs, and those who stay in the profession become quite adept at handling almost anything the world can throw at them. The feeling of always being in control breeds a certain degree of complacency in cops. Most fail to recognize the need to rejuvenate their bodies and minds on a regular basis. A little over 2000 years ago Hippocrates recognized that there was a connection between physical and mental health, but even today, this basic tenet of good health is ignored. In a 2008 study on the effects of stress on law enforcement officers at the University of Buffalo, it was discovered that the pressures of the job put officers at a higher risk to suffer high blood pressure, insomnia, and heart problems. Officers were also found to have a higher level of destructive stress hormones in their blood, and the effect of all these factors, led to a higher than average suicide rate. It would appear, despite the recognition of the strong mind body correlation, most cops don’t see these factors applying to them. Taking into account the strong mind-body connection, below are ten tips to keep your mind sharp, which will enhance your physical and mental well-being in the process:

1. Look on learning as a lifelong process. Everyone is born with a certain level of natural intelligence, which we might refer to as “mental horsepower”. This intelligence continues

to grow through adolescence, but then begins a very gradual decline. Intelligence also has another component, which could be best described as “nurtured intelligence”. This form of intelligence continues to grow throughout your lifetime as a result of formal education and life experiences. Through conscious effort, you are able to maintain and even grow your intelligence despite the ravages of aging. The problem is that in order to achieve this growth, learning must be looked on as a lifelong process. Putting it in more user friendly terms, just think back to when you successfully completed your last formal education, and how smart you thought you were. Then, recall how over time you came to realize how shallow your understanding really was. Often a recent college graduate is referred to as “sophomoric” because of the tendency, like second year students, to feel they have ‘vastly superior knowledge’, when in reality any superiority is miniscule at best. Quite often what you learn at the time may seem to have little significance to your life in the present. What you quite possibly have learned is what vocational professionals refer to as “transferrable skills”. In learning to drive, for example, you develop a complex set of motor skills which translate brain activity into physical responses. Though learning to drive will not make you a competent forklift operator, it will help you learn to operate a forklift much more easily. Learning the basic mechanical skills of plumbing, then, will make it easier to learn auto mechanics. Learning doesn’t end with schooling, and everything you learn may benefit you in the long run. Formal education in your profession also prepares you for jobs at a higher level.

2. Try to learn at a regular, steady rate. As in the tale of the tortoise and the hare, slow and steady wins the race. You don’t have to be quite that slow, but you get the idea. Everyone knows that the best way to learn something is through repetition. Unfortunately, when the mind is tired, like the body, it fails to perform at its optimal level. Conditioning the mind is like conditioning the body. You don’t grab the heaviest barbell in the gym and try to lift it. You start with a lighter weight with which you can do a number of repetitions in order to condition the body to lift gradually heavier weights. The mind works on the same principle. It works best if allowed to develop gradually. Continuing with the mind body analogy, like your body gradually becomes adapted to take on heavier loads, the mind is able to process greater amounts of information when it is regularly exercised. In the end you will be able to take on and process larger and larger doses of information with ease. Part of this facilitation will be the result of recognizing similarities with previously learned information, or the concept of transferability of skills discussed in the first point above.

3. Learn to use memory aids. If you really need to remember something, memory aids are an invaluable tool. Think of a memory aid as you would a ladder. If you had to climb over

a tall fence, you most probably would employ a ladder to help you over. Memory aids are like that ladder. You can do without them, but they certainly make the job a lot easier. One frequently used memory aid is to put the things you want to remember into a song. Because you already know the tune, you will receive natural, built in prompts when you try to sing it with the new words. In an episode of the popular television program, NCIS, two of the members of the team joined in to sing a song they had learned in college, written by a professor to help students remember all of the elements of the periodic table. Sounds foolish, but it works. Memory aids, or mnemonics, come in a variety of forms. In order to memorize a list, for example, it often helps to make a sentence in which the first letter of every word in the sentence is also the first letter of every word you want to remember. An example would be if you wanted to remember the colors of the rainbow, which are red, orange, blue, green, indigo, and violet. It would be a difficult thing to do. If you used the mnemonic Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain, in which the first letter of each word in the sentence corresponds to the first letter of one of the colors of the rainbow, you would find it easier to remember the colors. A little research online will provide you with a number of different ways to apply mnemonics.

4. Eat a more healthy diet. The mind-body interdependence makes a healthy diet essential for a proper balance of the two to be maintained. In police work, the demands of the job often make eating a healthy diet, or eating on a regular schedule, a near impossibility unless you are very proactive in your approach to eating. Almost every restaurant chain which would be open on the late swing and graveyard shift has a number of health conscious selections. Salads are usually your best choice, although if you want more substantial fare, consider the “seniors” menu . . . not because you are a senior, but because you hope to be one someday. Avoid foods that are high in sugar such as a candy bar, or the proverbial donut. Another excellent idea is to always carry some healthy snacks with you or to brown bag it. By brown bagging it, you have complete control over what you eat, and can better control when you eat as well. By creating your own meals you can ensure that you have plenty of complex carbohydrates such as are found in whole grain products, fruits, vegetables and dairy products such as skim milk and low fat yogurt. These foods do not cause the spike, and subsequent rapid drop, in energy levels so often associated with foods which are high in sugar; this drop in energy level is also associated with the condition known as “brain fog”, with its associated symptom, the inability to think clearly. Although the AMA and other groups have begun to extol the virtues of caffeine, such as found in the other policeman’s staple, coffee, moderation is the key. Harvard Health Publications warn that excessive amounts of coffee can adversely affect heart rate and blood pressure, and may cause irregular heartbeats. In addition, when drinking coffee, you should be aware that the effects of caffeine may last as long as 8 hours, so a cup or two

more than 2 hours into your shift will almost always have a negative effect on sleep patterns. If you are in danger of nodding off, a little exercise will quickly revive you.

5. Have a regular, program of physical exercise. Simply stated, a well thought out plan of regular exercise is one of the best things you can do for your physical and mental health. The best and easiest forms of exercise to do on a regular basis are those involving aerobic activity such as jogging or walking. The purpose of this kind of exercise is to elevate the heart rate, so of the two, jogging is preferred. Another alternative would be cycling. With these activities, little preparatory time is required, and you could start each day from the convenience of your home. If a more rigorous or varied program is what you prefer, membership in a gym is only a modest expenditure, or even paid for by some departments. The key factor in deciding what program you want to embark on involves choosing an activity which you really enjoy doing. No exercise program will be of any lasting benefit if only done on a sporadic or half-hearted basis. Two other activities which will boost the heart rate and yield strength benefits are swimming and weight training. Every exercise program should also include activities to keep the muscles loose and supple. When muscles have been stretched, they are less likely to sustain injuries.

6. Get plenty of rest. Although the need to get rest and recuperation should be obvious, often the demands of the job make this difficult. Anyone who has worked the third shift, gotten off at 8:00 AM and had to spend all day in court, knows how easy it is to get thoroughly exhausted. Lack of sleep has been known in some instances, to cause symptoms which mimic mental illness. Even when no obvious symptoms are present, lack of the ability to focus, brought on by fatigue, makes the quantity and quality of your work go down and could be life threatening in the event of a confrontation. The body needs seven to nine hours of quality sleep per night, and the operative word here is “quality”. When your body has had sufficient rest it secretes melatonin, which regulates what is known as your circadian rhythms, and keeps your bodily functions working in harmony. Often when you get off from work, you are still ‘wired’ from the day’s activities. Instead of answering those backed up e-mails or working on some project, choose an activity which will help you relax such as mild exercise, deep breathing, or reading.

7. Take nutritional supplements regularly. Because of the demands your job, as previously noted, maintaining a healthy diet is particularly difficult. To ensure that you are getting all of the nutrition your body needs, you should regularly take supplements in pill, capsule, or liquid form. B vitamins, for example, can improve your memory. Zinc, Co-Q10, and essential fatty acids are known to be essential in maintaining healthy brain function.

You can get the necessary fatty acids in things such as fish oil, flax seeds, or hemp products. Ginko Biloba, which has acquired the sobriquet of “the brain herb,” is now found in a number of nutrition bars and popular drinks and should be included in your regimen. This herb has been found to not only improve brain performance, but to aid such processes as memorization. In addition, it has other healthful benefits such as preventing macular degeneration which could cause vision loss. Bacopa, or water hyssop is another important supplement. It has been well known and widely used in India for centuries because it not only will improve your ability to comprehend new material, but it will also enhance your ability to retain your newly acquired knowledge.

8. Stay abreast with current occupational trends. Your brain works best when you are relaxed and confident. One of the best ways to be relaxed in the work environment is to be at the top of your game. One excellent way to do this is by maintaining a current subscription to several professional journals. By knowing what is coming down the pike, you will be prepared to help suggest or implement new programs. Because of the rapid advances in computer technology, it is important to stay abreast with your department’s efforts to stay current in the computer age. If your assignment doesn’t actually let you work with the new technology, talk to some of the personnel who use it and get a better feel for its benefits and detriments.

9. Take positive steps to reduce stress in your life. Everyone has heard the phrase “Stress kills”, but not enough of us take it seriously. Stress is a positive thing when taken in short doses, such as when your body secretes adrenaline in a street confrontation. At times like that, the adrenaline makes you more alert and more capable of coping with a threat. It is when stress is prolonged that it has a negative effect on the body. Prolonged stress can cause such problems as headaches, anxiety, and depression, just to mention a few. It is estimated that stress is responsible for 75% to 90% of all visits to a doctor’s office, because it can also play a part in a number of skin conditions, and can aggravate asthma, arthritis, and diabetes. Though a little bit of stress is normal, what can you do to keep it from getting out of hand? First and foremost, don’t try to mask the effects of stress by using a cigarette or a drink “to relax”. This tactic can lead to substance abuse, particularly with alcohol, and it would be a pity to end a promising career because you had to have a little drink before work “just to relax”. Although for years the common belief has been that law enforcement personnel have a higher divorce rate than the norm, this is not borne out by the statistics. But stress at home can still have a deleterious effect on your performance in the field and could cost you your life. If you are having problems in your marriage, seek professional help. Most cops are averse to asking for help, seeing it as a

sign of weakness. One of the primary advantages of using outside help is that the problems can be viewed objectively, by someone with no stake in the game. Seeking outside help before a problem gets out of hand, is the intelligent thing to do. Stress can also be reduced through a variety of physical activities. Yoga, meditation, and deep breathing are just a few of the ways that many people have found effective in reducing stress. Having a life outside of police work is also a major asset. Making sure that you put in as much effort into your family as you do into your job will pay huge dividends in the long run. Similarly, try to include some non-law enforcement people in your circle of friends, and to engage in social activities regularly. All of these activities help you maintain a healthy, relaxed, and balanced perspective.

10. Use mental games or exercises to sharpen your mind. Scientists have found that your brain actually forms new neural pathways when it is confronted with a problem which it must solve. By utilizing engaging activities you can have fun while improving the working ability and the capacity of your brain. Studies have shown that in as little as ten hours, you can make dramatic improvements in brain function. The brain has a seemingly infinite capacity to learn and to grow. Some games will help improve your memory, others will improve your attention span, and still others will improve your ability to solve problems. Because of the vast number of games of this nature, there are games to suit every taste. While it is beyond the purview of this article to go into this subject at length, a little bit of online research will lead you to the games which will be most useful to you. If you are going to get smarter, make it fun too.

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