

## **What if Somebody YOU Know is Suicidal?**

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Twice as many peace officers die because of suicide than are killed in the line of duty each year! Given the size of the LASD, we can expect about two sworn suicides a year in addition to our civilian suicides! It does happen; and it happens to us. Law enforcement suicide has a devastating impact on partners, colleagues, supervisors, first responders, family, friends and the community.

And there **are** signs if you know what to look for. Eighty percent (80%) of people who attempt suicide tell somebody about their intentions first via their actions or actual statements. As a friend or colleague, you may be the first person to witness evidence of suicidal thoughts and behaviors in a friend. Although not every suicide can be stopped, most individuals who are considering suicide are ambivalent and really just want the pain to go away. If somebody (like you) can intervene and get the person to help, suicidal individuals are usually able to recover and go on with their productive lives. So if it is possible to spot it and intervene in the process, why aren't we doing it more? What obstacles stand in our way in "rolling backup" to our fellow officers for this very real and dangerous threat to life?

The first obstacle is lack of information. (We either didn't know the warning signs for suicidal thinking, or we didn't recognize them until too late.) Sometimes we are held back by inaccurate myths like "people who talk about suicide never commit it," or "don't bring up suicide and get them thinking about it if they haven't mentioned it." These problems are easy to fix. Employee Support

Services Bureau is launching a suicide awareness program that will include articles like these, brochures, pocket cards, and a video - all of which contain concrete information about signs, symptoms, and resources.

By far the hardest obstacle to overcome, however, is our own **mindset**. What if I am wrong? I don't want to get him in trouble. I don't want to ruin her career. I'm not a rat! Cops have good people instincts - trust your gut. Getting a consultation from ESSB can be done in confidence. ESSB can arrange to see the person for a same day emergency session. Only the psychologist and the person in question need to know that it occurred. Psychologists at ESSB believe in "necessary and sufficient" intervention. Most individuals who are feeling suicidal are able to handle the feelings through counseling and the help and support of friends. A small percentage may need the assistance of medication to help with mood or sleep. None of these require the involvement or awareness of the unit of assignment. The only time an ESSB psychologist breaches confidentiality for suicidal thinking is when a person is imminently suicidal (as in right now) **and** unable or unwilling to cooperate with a plan to stay safe. So getting a suicidal friend to help does not get him or her in trouble or ruin a career unless the person wants to commit suicide right now **and** will do nothing to try and get help. At that point, you are still better off getting the person to help. It is better to have a live friend who is mad at you than having to do a death notification to the friend's spouse, parent or kid!

You can't stop suicide individuals who give no signs. Even psychologists, despite all their training and experience, occasionally lose patients that are suicidal. But you have **many** ways to increase the chances that you can help save the life of somebody you know and care about.

1. Be aware of what is going on in your friends' lives (recent relationship breakups, sudden social withdrawal, increased drinking, etc.).
2. Know available resources and consult ESSB if you even think somebody might be in trouble.
3. Know the signs/symptoms (keep the brochure some place handy, watch the video, carry the card). If you don't feel comfortable, ask for training from ESSB.
4. Make sure that your friends feel that their problems will be met with help and support - not panic and judgement. Saying things like, "I don't know how somebody could be so selfish (weak, etc.) as to commit suicide!" is not likely to encourage a friend to confide.
5. When you have concerns, check in with other friends to complete the big picture - they may have seen things you have not.
6. Listen when friends bring concerns to you. If they are worried enough about somebody to bring it to your attention, you should be worried enough to take their concerns seriously and support them in taking the necessary steps to aid the individual (or taking those steps yourself, if appropriate).
7. If you see any signs/symptoms, check them out (or ask ESSB or a PSP person to make an outreach). Become acquainted with the Chaplains and PSP at your UOA.
8. If you suspect suicidal ideation, ask the question "Are you thinking about hurting yourself?" It will **not** give them a new idea! Take all suicidal comments/hints seriously (even jokes).
9. If you get a "yes" answer, don't leave the person alone (get a friend or PSP to sit with the person) and request help from ESSB immediately.

10. When the crisis is over, get debriefed yourself!

**YOU** will be an integral part of the suicide awareness program. Knowing signs and symptoms is just the beginning. Suicide does happen at the LASD, and you can be part of the team that makes sure it **does not happen to somebody you know!** If you have any questions, contact Employee Support Services Bureau at (213) 738-3500.

