

What if Somebody on YOUR Watch is Suicidal?

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When someone attempts or commits suicide, it is natural for everyone around him or her to wonder if there was something they could have said or done that would have made a difference. Was there something, some sign, that they missed? Supervisors, FTO's and partners are often particularly hard hit. Supervisors often see subordinates as their responsibility (whether realistic or not); some even joke about playing "Mom or Dad" to a bunch of "kids." So what happens when somebody we may feel responsible for becomes suicidal?

But suicide doesn't happen at the LASD, does it? It has been said that suicide is not a problem for law enforcement officers. However, twice as many peace officers die because of suicide than are killed in the line of duty! Given the size of the LASD, we can expect about two sworn suicides a year in addition to our civilian suicides! So 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. So whose watch will it happen on this year?

In talking to supervisors after the suicide of a subordinate, they often mention a number of common factors they figured out only after the suicide: 1) They did not know the person was in that much trouble and/or emotional distress, 2) There were signs that they did not know were significant at the time, 3) They bought into myths like "people that talk about suicide never commit it," or "don't bring up suicide and get them thinking about it if they haven't mentioned it," and 4) All the

supervisors had a bit of the picture, but nobody talked to anybody else to put it all together. These supervisors learned from what happened and have high hopes of being able to successfully intervene “next time.” We can learn from these supervisors without going through the pain they experienced! 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 (e.g., a supervisor) can intervene and get them to help, suicidal individuals are usually able to recover from their depression and go on with their productive lives.

Eighty percent (80%) of people who attempt suicide tell somebody about their intentions first via their actions or actual statements. As a supervisor, you may be the first person to hear or witness evidence of suicidal thoughts and behaviors in somebody (subordinate or peer) on your shift. You need to be ready to intervene! Ready does not mean that you had some class that covered suicide signs and symptoms for 15 minutes, 5 years ago; it means much more. The good news is you don't have to do it alone.

Employee Support Services Bureau is launching a suicide awareness program. The program includes:

1. Articles like this in the Star News, Dispatcher and Star & Shield,
2. Brochures that include statistics, concrete information about signs and symptoms, resources, etc., (in case your memory does not stretch back to those 15 minutes, 5 years ago),
3. Cards that summarize the information (that can be slipped into a wallet),
4. A video depicting common situations involving peers and supervisors,

5. Reminders of how Employee Support Services and the Peer Support Program can be of assistance to supervisors should they suspect someone is suicidal

A supervisor cannot stop suicidal individuals who give no signs. Even psychologists, despite all their training and experience, occasionally lose patients that are suicidal. But supervisors have **many** ways to increase the chances that they will help save a life.

1. Know the signs/symptoms, e.g., depression, increased alcohol use, recent loss (relationship, work, or other) feeling helpless/hopeless. Keep the brochure some place handy; watch the video; carry the card! If you don't feel comfortable, ask for training from ESSB.
2. Know available resources and consult ESSB if you even think somebody might be in trouble.
3. Be aware of your people - know what is going on (recent relationship breakups, sudden social withdrawal, increased drinking, etc.).
4. Ensure that your people feel that their problems will be met with help and support - not panic and judgement.
5. When you have concerns, check in with other supervisors to complete the big picture - they may have seen things you have not.
6. Listen when subordinates or colleagues 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 on your watch!** If you have any questions, contact Employee Support Services Bureau at (213) 738-3500.