



Assistant Commandant for Human Resources (CG-1) Leadership Talking Points: Suicide Prevention Month

15 Sep 14

What is Suicide Prevention Month and why is it important?

During the month of September each year, awareness about suicide and how to prevent it is brought to the attention of the U.S. public. Because death by suicide is tragic, observation of Suicide Prevention Month provides an opportunity to demonstrate the Coast Guard's collective resolve to combat this problem, increase knowledge about suicidal behavior, and foster an understanding of prevention actions. Although Suicide Prevention Month brings special attention to this issue, it is important to remember that the possibility of suicide exists at all times.

How big is the problem of death by suicide?

In CY 2013, there were 10 active duty deaths by suicide in the Coast Guard and 259 reported by DoD. In the U.S. (2012), the Department of Health and Human Services reported that each year 35,000 deaths are due to suicide. According to the 2008 to 2012 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health, 8.6 million adults aged 18 or older had serious thoughts of suicide in the past year. For every death by suicide, there are also at least 6 survivors directly impacted including remaining family members and co-workers. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), suicide is one of the leading causes of death worldwide and is considered a significant public health issue.

What are the causes of suicide?

Suicide is a complex issue and the causes are diverse. Just as in the general population and the entire military, suicides in the Coast Guard are usually associated with relationship problems, financial distress, legal issues, and depression.

What are the signs that someone may be thinking of suicide?

While there may be others, the most typical signs for someone thinking about suicide are hopelessness, anxiety, feeling like there is no way out or reason to live, self-destructive behavior such as alcohol and drug abuse, withdrawing from family and friends, no longer enjoying favorite activities, talking about death, and acquiring weapons or other lethal means.

Are there other individual risk factors?

Yes, other contributors to self-harming behavior include trauma exposure, cumulative stress and competing stress from work and home, history of suicide attempts and/or family deaths and attempts, history of sexual assault and/or substance abuse disorders, young male, and history of rage and violent behavior. Presence of these factors does not mean someone will take his/her own life. They are contributing factors and not necessarily predictive.



Assistant Commandant for Human Resources (CG-1) **Leadership Talking Points: Suicide Prevention Month**

15 Sep 14

Are there organizational risk factors?

There are also factors in organizations that would be considered risk factors with regard to stress, depression, and other psychological concerns. The Institute of Medicine identified these key elements: lack of accountability, increased operational tempo, poor unit morale, institutional racism/sexism, tolerance of high risk behavior as well as bullying and hazing, unit isolation from family and other support, decline in leadership, and stigma/derogatory talk about suicide and behavioral health issues in general.

Are there protective factors that lead to resilience and readiness?

At the individual level, protective factors that build resilience and readiness include: having a supportive command and leadership; unit cohesion; presence of supportive family members, friends and peers; sense of purpose and meaning in life, participation in spiritual practices and communities, hobbies, and recreational activities; proper nutrition, sleep and exercise; adaptability; work-life balance; positive self-esteem; and a sense of humor.

Protective factors in organizations include: standards and regulations; experienced leaders; employer support; availability of help/support; strong communication; sense of fairness; good order and discipline; unit cohesion, good morale and readiness; holistic view of staff; and a climate of trust.

What is the impact of stigma and how do I eliminate it?

Stigma is one of the primary reasons people do not ask for help when their situation is really deteriorating. In the Coast Guard, survey data indicate that 30% of individuals who felt they had behavioral health problems and needed help did not get it because of their fear of job impact, concern about what others would think, and belief that doing so would be considered a sign of weakness. Stigma also contributes to waiting longer to get help (when things are worse), keeping issues private, isolation, and the perception there is no help available. Organizational risk factors (discussed above) also create stigma and inhibit help-seeking behavior.

Education is one of the most effective ways to reduce stigma. Educate yourself and members of your unit on the symptoms of stress. Hold discussions about suicide prevention with your staff. Recognize when stigma is creating a barrier to care and take actions to eliminate it. Learn about and advertise ways to get help and access resources. Create a culture of trust, one which is healthy and positive and within which it is safe to ask for help. Acknowledge and convey to your staff that it is OK to not be OK. Life's challenges will arise and everyone will face them from time to time. Correct misunderstandings about mental health issues, perceptions that seeking help will have a negative job impact, and thoughts that weakness is associated with getting help. Be aware of and correct others' misunderstandings, bullying, and insensitivities. Leaders can



Assistant Commandant for Human Resources (CG-1) Leadership Talking Points: Suicide Prevention Month

15 Sep 14

also encourage healthy behavior such as good nutrition, exercise, and personal responsibility.

What help is available for someone needing help?

For additional information about suicide and resources for those in need of help, consider these programs and services:

- A) The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: Call 800-273-TALK at any time. Speak with someone who can help you talk about your situation and identify resources.
<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>
- B) CG SUPRT: Call 855- CG SUPRT (855-247-8778) at any time. This is the Coast Guard Employee Assistance Program, available to assist active duty members, reservists, civilian employees and family members with a full range of issues such as financial matters, relationship discord, and other stress that, if neglected, could lead to more serious consequences such as depression and suicidal thoughts. CG SUPRT can provide assistance in an emergency, offering counseling services and other appropriate resources for any problem you might be experiencing. You can also visit CG SUPRT online by going to www.cgsuprt.com. All CG SUPRT services are free.
- C) Coast Guard medical personnel and Work-Life Employee Assistance Program Coordinators are also available to assist. Their contact information can be found at: http://www.uscg.mil/worklife/suicide_prevention.asp
- D) The Chaplain corps is another valuable resource in the Coast Guard. Their contact information can be found at: <http://www.uscg.mil/chaplain/locations/> or by calling 1-855-USCG-CHC (855-872-4242)
- E) For additional information about suicide and the Coast Guard policies on suicide prevention and other Work-Life matters, go to: <http://www.uscg.mil/worklife>. To view messages and videos from Coast Guard senior leaders, go to <http://allhands.coastguard.dodlive.mil/2014/08/29/a-very-real-look-at-suicides-in-the-coast-guard/>.
- F) Call 911 if there is an immediate emergency.