

**E-PME**  *Enlisted*  
**PROFESSIONAL MILITARY EDUCATION**

**Suicide Warning Signs 4.E.01**

**Learning Objective(s):** **EXPLAIN** the goals of the Coast Guard’s Suicide Prevention Program.

**Why You Need to Know This**

Suicide is not just a medical problem. Rather, it is a preventable personnel loss that impacts unit readiness, morale, and mission effectiveness. Unfortunately, suicide is common in virtually all segments of society, from young and old, male and female, rich and poor, and in every ethnic group. “Annually, suicide claims an estimated 34,000 lives” (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention).

Relationship disruption, substance abuse, financial problems, legal troubles, and mental health issues such as depression, are just a few of the factors that can increase a person’s suicide risk.

This lesson will highlight the information you will need to recognize the signs of shipmates, family or friends in distress, and most important assist you with intervention and prevention support strategies.

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**Topics Covered**

This section will cover the following topics:

- Goals of the Coast Guard’s Suicide Prevention Program
- Common Risk Factors
- Suicide Warning Signs
- Taking Preventive Action ( Including the “**A.C.E.**” technique)
- Suicide Prevention Support

At the end of this lesson you will be required to participate in a learning activity. You are encouraged to first review the learning activity and the sign off requirements located in the “**You and Your Supervisor**” section of this lesson. Reviewing this information before you begin the lesson will allow you to take proper notes and focus on key learning points.

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**Goals of the Coast Guard's Suicide Prevention Program**

Suicide impacts families as well as unit morale and mission readiness. All employees, no matter what their rank, need to not only recognize signs and circumstances surrounding suicidal or distressed behavior, but more important intervene early and help those who are in need of support and help.

Many Coast Guard personnel have been reluctant to seek help due to the perceived stigma associated with treatment. They have feared they will lose their security clearances and their careers. Support exists, and there is no shame asking for help—no matter what problems a member is facing. There are many resources to help members address their problems.

The goals of the Coast Guard's Suicide Prevention Program are to:

- Minimize suicidal behavior among all Coast Guard employees and their family members by empowering all personnel to recognize persons in distress and to take supportive action to help them.
- Encourage help-seeking behavior by reducing the stigma associated with receiving mental health care.
- Protect those who responsibly seek mental health treatment from unfair actions resulting from seeking help.

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**Common Risk Factors**

Rarely is suicide spontaneous. Most suicidal people desperately want to live; they are just unable to see alternatives to their problems. A combination of individual, relational, community and societal factors contribute to the risk of suicide. Becoming aware of these factors can help you identify people who may be at risk.

Common suicide risk factor are listed below:

- Relationship trouble, especially if in a relationship that appears to have ended or is about to end.
  - Career problems, including an obvious drop in duty performance or difficulties with others at work.
  - Legal difficulties, especially if facing criminal charges that impact one's job and career.
  - Financial trouble, especially those that are perceived to be without a reasonable solution.
  - Emotional & mental health instability.
  - Prior threats or attempts.
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## Warning Signs

Sometimes threats or other statements revealing a person's desire or intention to commit suicide are ignored. Mistakenly, some people believe that an individual, who is serious about suicide, keeps it quiet. This is not usually true. It been estimated that 80% of people who commit suicide have communicated their threat to another person.

If someone you know is going through a particularly stressful or difficult situation, watch for signs of a crisis that may become insurmountable. Suicide warning signs can be very specific (such as a verbal or written threat) or vague (such as indirect comments or behaviors). Because suicide is almost always thought out far in advance, becoming aware of these clues, such as comments about death or depression can help prevent a tragedy.

Warning signs may include:

- Severe depression, accompanied by feelings of hopelessness or not wanting to go on with life.
- Loneliness and/or withdrawal.
- Social difficulties, including feelings of being an outcast or being picked on by others.
- Giving away personal or prized possessions.
- Marked changes in behavior or personality, including severe mood changes, changes in eating and sleeping habits, substance abuse, reckless behavior—like taking undo risks.
- Suicide ideation or preoccupation with death, including making preparations such as “getting one’s affairs in order.”

Often, those who are considering suicide often show sudden and noticeable changes in behavior and personality. For example:

- The person who is normally reserved or conservative suddenly becomes loud and conspicuous.
- The person who is normally outgoing and friendly becomes aloof and wants to be alone.

People contemplating suicide are often torn between a will to live and a desire to die. Therefore, they try to let others know about it, hoping that someone will help them. Whether you hear a direct statement or suspect a subtle hint, it is important to act quickly when warning signs are present.

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**Taking Preventive Action**

Observing any of the warning signs alone or together with other indicators is an important clue to how a person is feeling and whether suicide could potentially be contemplated.

People who try to commit suicide may not appear to be very serious about their attempts. For example, they may take a bottle of pills at a time when they are sure to be discovered. They may injure themselves in a way that is not likely to be lethal. However, these attempts are a cry for help. Do not ignore it or pass it off lightly. Even if the person who made the attempt makes light of it or tries to explain it away, get professional help. Do not erroneously dismiss these types of suicide attempts as “just a bid for attention.” When it comes to someone talking about or alluding to suicide, believe them. Never keep such knowledge a secret.

Talking about suicide almost always reduces chances that it will happen. Remember, you ***do not*** need to be a trained professional to discuss suicide with a friend, relative, or anyone you suspect is in trouble—including personnel who outrank you.

The **A.C.E** technique is a simple mnemonic device which serves as an aid for what to do when you suspect someone is thinking of suicide.

A.C.E stands for:

**A – Ask.** This is not an easy thing to ask, but it is essential. Do not be afraid to ask someone directly: “Are you thinking about killing yourself?”

**C – Care.** Be willing to listen and allow the person to express feelings in private. Talk openly about suicide. Encourage the person to seek help. Show you care.

**E – Escort.** Never leave the person alone, unless you are convinced they are not suicidal and the person has convincingly denied that they are suicidal. Escort them to immediate help. Adopt the attitude you can help them.

Facing the possibility of embarrassment through overreaction is much easier than facing a person's death because of your failure to act.

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**Suicide Prevention Support**

As you attempt to help others in distress, know that there are numerous resources available. Contact your supervisor or Regional Work-Life Office for specific contact information.

Key resources include:

- Coast Guard Employee Assistance Program (EAP)  
Coordinator: 1-800-872-4957
  - EAP hotline: 1-800-222-0364 (24/7)
  - National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273 TALK (24/7)
  - Coast Guard Medical Clinics
  - Mental health clinics or hospital emergency room
  - Coast Guard Chaplains or church clergy
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**Learning Activity**



Complete the online Suicide Prevention Program Mandated Training (MT) found on the Coast Guard Portal at the following link:

<https://cgportal.uscg.mil/delivery/Satellite/trained>

The course takes approximately 20 minutes to complete. When you are done, print out a record of your course completion and show it to your supervisor.

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**For You and Your Supervisor**

Completion of this task is indicated by the Suicide Prevention Program course completion record.

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**References**

The references used to develop this lesson can be found at CG Directives(CG-612), [www.uscg.mil/directives](http://www.uscg.mil/directives):

- Coast Guard Suicide Prevention Instruction, COMDTINST M1734.1(series)
- Coast Guard Medical Manual, COMDTINST M6000.1(series)

The following references can be found online:

- Coast Guard Suicide Prevention online Mandated Training course
  - Coast Guard Office of Work-Life, <http://www.uscg.mil/worklife>
  - American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, [http://www.afsp.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewpage&page\\_id=050fea9f-b064-4092-b1135c3a70de1fda](http://www.afsp.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewpage&page_id=050fea9f-b064-4092-b1135c3a70de1fda)
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