IDENTIFYING SUICIDAL BEHAVIOR
HANDOUT

Factors that can trigger suicidal behavior

1) Recent excessive drinking or use of drugs. Many times, depression sets in when the person sobers up. Others commit suicide while still intoxicated.

2) Recent loss of a stabilizing resource. The loss of a stabilizing resource can have a devastating impact.

3) Severe guilt or shame over the offense. Ironically, more people take their own lives over minor offenses than serious crimes.

4) Inmate on inmate rape or the threat of it. For new inmates, this can simply be the fear of sexual assault.

5) Current mental illness. People who are depressed or delusional with voices telling them what to do may also be suicidal.

6) Poor health or terminal illness. This is true for all ages, and involves depression over diseases such as AIDS or cancer.

High Risk Suicide Periods

1) The first 24 hours of confinement; with emphasis on the first 3 hours.

2) Intoxication or withdrawal. Depression frequently sets in when the inmate sobers up.

3) Waiting for trial.

4) Sentencing. The breaking point may occur just before or after sentencing.

5) Impending release.

6) Holidays. The loneliness of being confined when families are normally together can become unbearable. This is also true for personal holidays.

7) Dark and alone. Since suicide is a very private act, it usually occurs during the hours of darkness or when the inmate is left unsupervised.

8) Decreased staff surveillance. Not only nights, but also weekends and holidays can offer more opportunities for suicides.

9) Bad news of any kind. For example, “Dear John” letters, restraining orders prohibiting contact with family, or disturbing news of any kind.
**Signs and Symptoms of Suicidal Behavior**

1) Depression or paranoia.

2) The inmate expresses shame or strong guilt over the offense.

3) The inmate talks about or threatens suicide.

4) The inmate is under the influence of alcohol or drugs and becomes depressed when sobering up.

5) Previous suicide attempts or a history of mental illness.

6) Severe agitation or aggressiveness.

7) Hopelessness or helplessness.

8) Unusual anxiety over consequences such as “What will my wife say?” or “What will my employer say?”

9) Noticeable mood or behavior change.

10) The inmate speaks unrealistically about getting out of jail.

11) Paranoid delusions or hallucinations.

**Recognizing Signs of Depression**

1) Feelings of inability to go on.

2) Extreme sadness and crying.

3) Withdrawal or silence.

4) Loss or increase of appetite or weight.

5) Insomnia or waking early or excessive sleeping.

6) Mood or behavior changes.

7) Tension or anxiety.

8) Lethargy, which means slowness of movement or unresponsiveness.


10) Loss of interest in people, personal appearance, or activities.

11) Excessive self-blaming or strong guilt feelings.

12) Agitation, which frequently precedes suicide.