

## **IDENTIFYING SUICIDAL BEHAVIOR (DETENTION)**

### **OBJECTIVES**

- Staff will learn several myths about suicide
- Staff will learn key factors that trigger suicidal behavior
- Staff will learn high risk periods for suicidal behavior
- Staff will learn signs and symptoms of suicidal behavior

Suicide is the leading cause of death to inmates in detention facilities. Although, it requires some effort by staff, most suicides are preventable. Suicide prevention requires a coordinated effort by everyone in the facility. Staff should take every threat seriously and immediately make the appropriate referrals. It is not our responsibility to interpret the sincerity of a suicide threat; we will let qualified professionals make that determination.

As detention officers, we encounter suicidal inmates, so we need to know how to identify suicidal behavior to prevent these senseless deaths. First, we will dispel a few myths about suicide, as these myths often lead to suicides because they keep officers from taking appropriate preventative action.

Myth # 1: People who threaten suicide don't commit suicide.

Fact: Most people who commit suicide have made direct or indirect statements indicating their intentions.

Myth # 2: People who attempt suicide once will not try it again.

Fact: Anyone with one or more suicide attempts is at much greater risk of repeated attempts.

Myth # 3: Suicidal people are intent on dying.

Fact: Most suicidal people feel trapped by living, and see death as the only way out. In truth, most of them want to live, but they can't cope with the situation they're facing.

Myth # 4: Talking to people about their suicidal thoughts will cause them to go through with it.

Fact: You cannot make someone suicidal by discussing the possibility of suicide. Instead, they are likely to respond positively to a genuine interest in their welfare.

Myth # 5: All suicidal people are mentally ill.

Fact: Although suicidal people are extremely depressed and unhappy, they are not necessarily mentally ill.

Myth # 6: If someone really wants to kill him or herself, there's generally nothing we can do about it.

Fact: Almost all jail suicides can be prevented.

### **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, e.g., loss of a family member or close friend, loss of a job or home, or expulsion from school.
- 3) Severe guilt or shame over the offense. Ironically, more people take their own lives over minor offenses than serious crimes. People of stature in the community who commit serious, shameful crimes such as child molestation or sexual assault are especially vulnerable to suicide.
- 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**

The other important condition that often influences suicidal behavior is the period of incarceration.

- 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. Sometimes the agony of the unknown or simply waiting creates unbearable anxiety.
- 4) Sentencing. The breaking point may occur just before or after sentencing.
- 5) Impending release. This can catch you off guard because most people consider release positive. However, for some people, the shame of facing family, friends, or co-workers may be too great to tolerate.

- 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. In fact, a number of suicides occur during shift changes when staff is distracted with other duties.
- 9) Bad news of any kind. For example, "Dear John" letters, restraining orders prohibiting contact with family, a "pink slip" from work, a notice of foreclosure on a home, a death notice, divorce proceedings, visits or lack of visits, or disturbing news of any kind.

### **Signs and Symptoms of Suicidal Behavior**

As previously mentioned suicidal inmates will most often give some indication of their intentions. However, officers may detect other signs and symptoms such as:

- 1) Depression or paranoia.
- 2) The inmate expresses shame or strong guilt over the offense.
- 3) The inmate talks about or threatens suicide. This includes statements that are death-related or final, such as, "I've had it," or "I can't take it anymore."
- 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 may act very calm once the decision has been made.
- 11) The inmate speaks unrealistically about getting out of jail.
- 12) The inmate becomes preoccupied with the past and does not deal effectively with the present.
- 13) The inmate begins packing belongings.
- 14) The inmate starts giving away possessions.

- 15) The inmate may try to hurt him or herself with attention-seeking gestures.
- 16) Paranoid delusions or hallucinations.

### **Recognizing Signs of Depression**

While all of the signs and symptoms can be important, the fact is people who are severely depressed commit 70-80% of all suicides. If you can recognize severe depression, you can often intervene to prevent a suicide. The most common indicators of severe depression are:

- 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.
- 9) Loss of self-esteem.
- 10) Loss of interest in people, personal appearance, or activities.
- 11) Excessive self-blaming or strong guilt feelings.
- 12) Difficulty concentrating or thinking.
- 13) Agitation, which frequently precedes suicide.

### **POLICY**

*Discuss all department policies and procedures related to suicide prevention.*

### **CLOSING**

*Encourage discussion about the department's suicide prevention policies and examples of past suicides or suicide attempts, and the measures that should be taken to prevent a suicide.*