10 Things Criminal Justice and Allied Professionals Need to Know about Suicide

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Research on suicide has dramatically improved the field’s understanding of the topic in recent years. Improvements in recognition, understanding, treatment, and outcomes have all been documented. There are several important factors discussed below to help professionals working within the criminal justice and allied fields become more familiar with aspects of suicide and how to address them when they arise.

1. The Job: Occupations experiencing increased levels of stress and exposure to trauma, such as correctional officers, police officers, or firefighters, are at increased risk for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, insomnia, substance misuse, and suicide.

2. The Secret: Suicide is a leading killer of first responders, however many are unaware of this killer. Agencies and administrators are obligated to ensure officers understand all the dangers and risks of the job in order to perform all aspects safely. Unfortunately, training on the topic of suicide prevention and awareness geared towards law enforcement officers is limited.

3. The Stigma: Stigmatization surrounding mental health issues is a leading reason many fail to seek assistance. Stigmas are difficult to break, as cultural change is gradual. Change begins with how we as human beings are treated and interact with those suffering from mental health issues.

4. The Truth: Most people do not want to die by suicide; they just want to stop the pain they are experiencing (i.e., physical, emotional, psychological). It is important to remember that this pain is temporary. People should not make permanent and irreversible decisions to solve a temporary and treatable problem.

5. Odd Behavior: Oftentimes, warning signs are present that something is wrong. This may include a change in the “normal” behavior or personality, to include “odd behavior” such as an arrest, a domestic violence incident, giving away prized possessions, or a lack of conscientiousness by a previously thoughtful individual.

6. Relationships: Relationship issues are often noted as a factor in many completed suicides. When issues are going on in the home they are often kept secret. Officers are afraid of being judged by peers. Claims, whether substantiated or not, against law enforcement professionals could mean the end of a career. However, relationship issues can be extremely stressful on the professional and may lead to maladaptive coping mechanisms (e.g., excessive consumption of alcohol or illicit and/or prescription drugs, infidelity, gambling, etc.).

7. Alcohol: The use of alcohol by professionals is a factor in a high percentage of completed suicides. Alcohol often becomes a maladaptive coping mechanism when professionals cannot appropriately deal with mounting stress. Alcohol suppresses the central nervous system, possibly making the act easier. In addition, alcohol impairs judgment, which can lead to impulsive behavior, all of which have been seen in suicide deaths.
8. Fear: Officers are often apprehensive when asking for assistance with mental health issues. They fear being ostracized and losing the trust of peers. They also fear losing the police identity (i.e., the gun and badge), a career, and even their families.

9. Resources: Many valuable resources are available to officers and other professionals in crisis who are struggling with mental health issues. Several common resources include: employee assistance programs (EAP), members of the clergy, professional/clinical assistance, physicians, and a 12-step program for police (Bottles and Badges) and peer support groups.

10. Seeking Help: No one chooses to have a mental health issue, but everyone deserves to feel good and to be happy. Seeking help is NOT a sign of weakness, it is a sign of strength and maturity. Seeking help not only saves lives, it saves careers, families, agencies, and communities. Asking for help aids in breaking the stigma surrounding mental health. You owe it to yourself, family, fellow officers, and community to be well.

Author Biographies

Olivia Johnson, DM, holds a doctorate in Organizational Leadership Management from the University of Phoenix, School of Advanced Studies. She is the Illinois State Representative and active Board Member for the National Police Suicide Foundation, she holds a three-year term with the Illinois Suicide Prevention Alliance (ISPA) as a suicidology researcher, and is an active ISPA member. Her life’s work is focused on suicide awareness and prevention efforts through research, publication, and community efforts.

Jerrod Brown, Ph.D., is the Treatment Director for Pathways Counseling Center, Inc. Pathways provides programs and services benefiting individuals impacted by mental illness and addictions. Jerrod is also the founder and CEO of the American Institute for the Advancement of Forensic Studies (AIAFS). Jerrod has completed four separate master’s degree programs and holds graduate certificates in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Other Health Disabilities (OHD), and Traumatic-Brain Injuries (TBI).