

From the Staff...



Ch Brewer

Suicide Prevention Efforts- A Chaplaincy Perspective

I recently represented NGB/HC as a member of the first ANG Suicide Analysis Board, consisting of multidisciplinary MOS's/AFSC's. The intent was to analyze and provide recommendations to senior leaders on systematic factors contributing to 17 identified ANG deaths during 2018. Our multifaceted board carefully reviewed all cases, looking for common themes with hopes of better informing prevention efforts. We spent an entire week reviewing military records, autopsy reports, police and OSI investigation reports, wing climate assessments and numerous other local post suicide reports. Representatives from each wing also appeared before our committee.

After an arduous examination, here were my major Prevention-Takeaways as seen through a Chaplain Lens:

1) "**Faith [Really] Works:**" A Relevant Protective Factor

I learned that spiritual resiliency really does matter. Faith is a relevant protective factor. It provides the means for hope and a belief in life's greater purpose. Without exception, the common denominator of suicides was a loss of hope and faith. In many respects, when facing a fall from grace or a crisis event, those devoid of spiritual resources, (e.g. lacking oil-lamp reserves, see Matt 25:1-13) had lost the safety net of hope. Although admittedly simplistic, they had become spiritually bankrupt. While a spiritual foundation may not create conviction in all, it truly can bolster believers against the silent erosion of convictions, which further reinforces despair. In contrast, whoever puts trust in God can receive support during trials, troubles and life's afflictions.

2) **We Need Better Marketing of Chaplain Confidentiality**

This was a matter of universal consensus on the committee. In many cases examined by the board, the airmen was afraid to reveal problems they were experiencing for fear of the consequences. This is particularly important when an airmen faces potential or perceived criminal charges and may be unaware of the absolute nature of chaplain confidentiality. What can we collectively do to build trust and better market this unique privilege? By what means can we help others understand that they can ask for trusted help, about ANYTHING, even a big mistake?

3) **None Needs to Face Their Troubles Alone**

Yes, everyone needs to take personal responsibility in carrying their own unique challenges or cross, BUT not alone... doing so creates bondage. Much like the Israelites subjected to 400 year bondage in Egypt, deliverance didn't come until Moses and God helped them (See Num 21:8). The protective scaffolding of many robust suicide prevention programs are in place, but Airman will remain stuck in metaphorical bondage until they reach out for help.

4) **Stigmas About Mental Health Continue to be Major Obstacles**

In spite of cultural shifts that reflect greater understanding for mental and emotional issues, a review of the 17 cases presented to the board revealed the unexpected nature of the tragedies. Though some warning signs and clues became evident, the majority of tragedies occurred in silence when stigma or shame overtaxed self-help seeking behaviors. Marshalling supportive help requires vulnerability, and a willingness to confide in a trusted wingman. Rather than remaining mired in a cycle of self-condemnation, help is available, but the individual must be willing to ask for it, then continue pressing forward on the path.

5) **Standards Matter**

While mental health factors were clearly evident, in many cases, the omission of adherence to standards led to the forfeiture of an otherwise key preventive factor. Keeping standards is always relevant. In the spiritual realm, people have faith in obeying commandments, which anchor their values to God. It has been astutely observed that God gave "Ten Commandments," not "ten suggestions." Safety and prosperity are byproducts of diligent observance of personal commitment, AFI's, the UCMJ and the Commandments of God.

This isn't to suggest that we are always going to hit the mark. Life is full of commas--thankfully not periods. But former missteps need not define life if we believe in God's redemptive power. "Scars only remind us where we've been. They don't have to dictate where we're going." (David Rossi, *Criminal Minds*). After course correction, inner resolve can again be bolstered.

These theological principles are definitely in our chaplain corps wheelhouse, should inform our ministry, and provide life-giving support to the military's suicide prevention efforts. I pray that you will continue to be blessed as you seek for guidance in your ministry to sustain and grow the hope of all service members.