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AF Leader's Guide for Post-Suicide Response

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Objectives

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- **Share 'Lessons Learned' from a SQ/CC who experienced a suicide in her unit**
- **Review why suicides happen**
- **Keys to establishing post-suicide response**
 - **For the family of the deceased**
 - **For your squadron**
 - **Sharing news of the suicide**
 - **Regarding social media**
 - **Memorial services**
- **Post-suicide considerations**
- **Additional resources**



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A Commander's 'Lessons Learned'

From an AFMC/CC:

- **“When there was a suicide in my unit, I was flooded with help, offers, friends and families asking questions...not to mention AF officials needing information immediately. What I learned was...”**
 - **Keep your game face on and search for patience**
 - **Always have your Service Dress ready**
 - **Connect with Mental Health Flt/CC or Chaplain and vent daily**
 - **Listen to other leaders who had a similar experience of a suicide during their command**
 - **Get someone to watch you and offer feedback on how you're doing**
 - **How your 'top cover' supports you is of immeasurable importance on how good, or how challenging, your response will be**
 - **Any death places demands on a unit, consider assigning two Family Liaison Officers (FLO)”**
 - **Implement a post-suicide response plan**



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Why Suicides Happen

- **Suicide is a *act* made by a person seeking relief from real or perceived pain**
 - **They likely were struggling with unresolved emotional, mental or physical disorders**
 - **They believed they were a burden due to their concerns**
 - **They believed they did not have *authentic connections* to others (despite appearances)**
 - **They developed fearlessness regarding self-death (those afraid of death/additional pain are less likely to kill themselves)**
 - **The decision may have been made while impaired by drugs or alcohol (often considered ‘impulsive’)**
 - **Or, the death was the result of a suicidal gesture, an attempt to bring attention to their pain, or possibly another goal. Such individuals may be experiencing ambivalence about their desire to die**



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Establishing Post-Suicide Response

- **Following an announced suicide, there is a statistically higher risk in the community for additional suicides**
- **Providing a timely and appropriate post-suicide response not only helps restore the unit/family and community, it can reduce the risk of further suicide events (“suicide contagion”)**
- **Successful suicide post-suicide response:**
 - **Helps grieving family/friends understand what happened**
 - **Minimizes extreme responses and secondary problems in family/friends/unit managers**
 - **Deaths often reawaken memories of prior losses which feel “real” again**



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Post-Suicide Response for the Family

- For the family of deceased:
 - Obtain as much information as readily available about the family and event before notifying next of kin
 - Review installation specific notification protocols
 - Consider assigning two Family Liaison Officers
 - Fast track them to the services they feel will be helpful
 - Establish the relationship you'd like to have with the survivors (i.e., "I'd like to contact you every two weeks and ensure you're supported")
 - Be mindful that families may over rely on you for support, or have unrealistic expectations of your time/attention
 - Respect the wishes of those choosing to keep a purposeful distance from you
 - Engage them directly; ask if you can assist them, or if they prefer you contact them at a later time



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Post-Suicide Response for Your Squadron

- Informing your unit:
 - Coordinate with Mental Health (MH) and Chaplains to have Traumatic Stress Response (TSR) team member(s) present when you inform your unit of the death
 - Inform your unit, in person, in an area where there's considerable privacy (if feasible)
 - In the rare event someone leaves the area due to their emotions, ensure a Wingman follows up with the person in a timely manner
- If word of the suicide has already spread, announce the mandatory meeting was called to discuss the "facts and rumors around a death you have likely heard of"
- Remind unit members that if they are contacted by the media, they should refer them to Public Affairs



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Post-Suicide Response in Smaller Units

- Consider a separate meeting for the unit in which the suicide occurred
 - With smaller groups, focus the message on how you recognize the unit knew/worked with the deceased personally
- Invite 1-2 Chaplains, MH, Employee Assistance Program (EAP) resources during the small group briefing
 - Total number of attendees should not outnumber the small group itself
- It is best, when possible, to brief the directly affected small group prior to the larger squadron brief



Sharing the News

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- Publicly disclose the death was by a “reported (or suspected) suicide”
 - Do not mention the method of the suicide or specifics more than ‘on’ or ‘off’ base
 - *It is a myth that talking about suicide will encourage more suicides*
 - However, incorrect communication risks glorifying the event, making suicide seem more common than it is, or providing details which encourage “copycats”
 - Inform your unit (*and again later in writing*) their participation in rumors, conjecture, or blaming only complicates recovery for the family, friends, and the unit as a whole
 - Express sadness at the Air Force’s loss and acknowledge the grief of the survivors
 - Emphasize the unnecessary nature of suicide as alternatives are readily available
 - Encourage all to seek assistance when distressed
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Sharing the News (cont.)

- Remind everyone of the value of being Wingmen and the need to assist personnel in distress by connecting them with resources
- Provide brief reminder of the warning signs for suicide risk
- Acknowledge that people will have a range of reactions
- Remain flexible, understanding, and kind to each other
- Follow your brief comments with time spent among your personnel and in their work areas
 - Use discernment when requesting senior leadership presence in the work areas along with you. If the leaders are favorably perceived by your personnel, their presence *should be encouraged*



Sharing the News (cont.)

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- **Remind everyone of the value of being Wingmen and the need to assist personnel in distress and connect them with resources**
- **Remain flexible, understanding, and kind to each other**
- **Provide brief reminder of the warning signs for suicide risk**
- **Acknowledge people will have a range of reactions**
 - **These comments are not blaming the deceased or those who knew the deceased. Post-suicide response is a process to ensure the living receive prevention messages throughout a loss.**
- **Follow your brief comments with time spent among your personnel and in their work areas**
- **Consider requesting senior leadership's presence in the work areas along with you. If the leaders are favorably perceived by your personnel, encourage their presence.**

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Regarding social media

- **It is possible the death is announced/discussed on social media sites even prior to the notification of the next of kin**
- **If social media is being used to report/discuss the death:**
 - **Discuss with senior leaders and JA the appropriate means to have a posting to the social media**
 - **An example posting for Facebook:**
 - **“We here in (unit) share in your loss. If you’re struggling with the news, there are lots of people and resources willing to help. Here is a list of resources in the (unit) area (insert appropriate contact info for your area). If you are outside our area, the 1-800-273-TALK crisis line is available nationally. Your local churches and mental health center can help you find additional nearby resources.”**



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Memorial Services

- **Consult with Chaplain and Mental Health**
 - **Consider adequacy of family sponsored memorial services prior to holding a unit-based memorial service**
 - **This may avoid the unintended adulation of the event**
 - **Provide info on flowers or 'in lieu of' gifts**
- **Never create public memorial (plaques, trees, etc)**
- **If funeral or memorial service is decided to be held:**
 - **Avoid idealizing/eulogizing deceased**
 - **Goals:**
 - **Comfort the grieving**
 - **Help survivors with guilt**
 - **Help survivors with anger**
 - **Address perceived stigma of getting help**
 - **Discuss how most overcome crisis and adversity and we are available to help each other accomplish that**



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Deciding Against a Unit Sponsored Service

- **If the suicide occurred in the workplace, or if work factors are “blamed” as a cause, there is a risk a formal service will inflame emotions**
- **Holding a service can create logistical/political binds**
 - **Creates expectation a service must be held for every suicide**
 - **Can place people hostile toward each other, and/or the Air Force, together in already heightened emotional time, etc.**
- **If a service is not held, announce “in lieu of” and inform unit of the alternative (examples)**
 - **Memorial book for collecting submissions to provide to the family**
 - **Share information regarding family’s plans for a memorial service (if any)**



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Post-Suicide Considerations

- **Maintain high visibility visits to the unit with intent to taper off to your routine pace by 30 days after death**
 - **Consider taking Mental Health and a Chaplain with you on walk around**
 - **At the 30 day mark, note to unit “I recognize you’re moving along and I respect the work it has taken”**
- **Be prepared for other unit issues to become heightened around 30 days (since you’ve been busy with the issues related to the death)**
 - **Delegate to trusted leaders**



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Post-Suicide Considerations

- **As 30 days mark a key chronological milestone in recovery from a crisis, it is important to consider unit members will have mixed reactions regarding the passage of time**
 - **Some will view it as “time to move on”**
 - **Some will count it as an emotional anniversary of the event (but with lesser severity)**
 - **Some may be irritated over others’ lack of progress: “why hasn’t everyone moved on already?”**
- **Tailor your actions following the 30 day mark based on information you discern regarding health of the unit on recovery**
- **Anniversaries of the event are periods of increased risk--increase strength-base messaging and encourage wingman concept**



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Additional Information

- **Postvention Manual**
 - <http://www.sprc.org/library/LifelineOnlinePostventionManual.pdf>
- **American Foundation for suicide prevention**
 - http://www.afsp.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewPage&page_id=1
- **Suicide survivor resource**
 - <http://www.suicidology.org/web/guest/suicide-loss-survivors>
- **Tragedy Assistance Program for survivors (Taps)**
 - <http://www.taps.org/>