

Law Enforcement

Helping those who help others...

BY THE STATEWIDE OFFICE OF SUICIDE PREVENTION, FLORIDA OFFICE OF DRUG CONTROL

“As a law enforcement officer, you are often called into action when something is wrong: when someone has been assaulted, robbed, or injured or when there is a confrontation. You interact with people who are angry, emotional, injured, frightened, or traumatized. You face situations that are, or could easily become, violent and threaten you, your fellow officers, and members of the public. This level of stress can take a toll” (sprc.org). Law enforcement officers are at elevated risk of divorce, alcoholism, and other emotional and health problems (Ayres, 1990). Police officers are also at risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which contributes to the risk of suicide (Tarrier & Gregg, 2004). Law enforcement officers may experience a suicide rate three times higher than that of municipal workers (Violanti). Job stress is only one of the reasons that many experts believe law enforcement officers are at special risk of suicide; another reason may be the police culture itself which sees strength and authority as essential components of the job and seeking help for emotional issues can be misconstrued as signs of weakness (sprc.org). Yet another reason is that law enforcement officers have a lethal means of suicide immediately at hand as carriers of a firearm (sprc.org). Most research shows that access to lethal means, such as a firearm, increases an individual’s risk of dying by suicide (Brent & Bridge, 2003; Miller, Azrael & Hemenway, 2004).

Some warning signs that an officer may be thinking of harming him or herself include: telling others they are going to hurt themselves; announcing they are going to do something to ruin their careers but they don’t care; admitting they feel out of control; appear hostile, blaming, argumentative, and insubordinate, or appear passive, defeated and hopeless; develop a morbid interest in suicide or homicide; indicate that they are overwhelmed and cannot find a solution to their problems; ask another officer to keep their weapon or inappropriately use or display of their weapon; begin behaving recklessly and taking unnecessary risks on the job and in their personal lives; carry more weapons than is appropriate; exhibit deteriorating job performance (which may be the result of alcohol or drug abuse)(Mohandie & Hatcher, 1999).

If you believe that another officer is thinking of harming him or herself, don’t be afraid to directly ask in private if this is so. If the officer admits such thoughts, or if the officer denies it but you are still concerned there are a number of steps you can take: 1) Express your concern to an appropriate person such as a supervisor or the department’s mental health professional, 2) Ask the officer to call the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at (800) 273-TALK (8255), 3) Offer to help the officer find a mental health professional, and 4) Help the officer’s family and friends develop a plan so that someone is with him or her at all times until the crisis is resolved (sprc.org). For more information, please visit the Central Florida Police Stress Unit at www.policestress.org.**

