

## Suicide: The Silent Trauma

*Suicide is a permanent answer to a temporary problem." Who is responsible, ultimately, for ensuring that a suicidal person doesn't act upon their impulses?*

### Preface

In the following essay, the author reflects on the emotional and professional challenges faced by chaplains when encountering inmate suicides. The core points include:

1. **Suicide in Corrections:** The essay emphasizes the rising statistics of suicides among both inmates and correctional officers, highlighting a serious issue within correctional facilities.
2. **Accountability and Blame:** The author contests the tendency of families and communities to blame corrections for inmate suicides, suggesting that the responsibility ultimately lies with the individuals themselves.
3. **Role of Chaplains:** Chaplains, while deeply empathetic and compassionate, view the act of taking one's life as ultimately within the domain of divine judgment and understanding.
4. **Spiritual Perspective:** The author underscores the importance of seeking God's understanding and recognizing the spiritual implications of suicide, rather than solely attributing blame to human actions.
5. **Resource for Further Reading:** The essay directs readers to the author's additional writing and training materials available at [www.Philemontrainingac.com](http://www.Philemontrainingac.com) for a more comprehensive exploration of the topic.
6. **Faith and Compassion:** Through the lens of faith in Jesus Christ, the author conveys a deep sense of compassion and grief for those who take their own lives, whether they are inmates or correctional officers.

### Suicide, the Silent Trauma

One of the hidden aspects of the life of correctional officers is suicide. Even the mention of suicide within the circle of officers draws a sobering solemn response. Many officers will disengage and withdraw when the topic is broached. Yet, the leading killer in law enforcement continues to be suicide. The latest horrific trend has been a growing number of murder suicide incidents in corrections.

I am not sure how often pastoral clergy engage in a suicide crisis, but I do know that law enforcement chaplains, especially those in corrections, see suicide crisis much more frequently than most clergy. In the past several years as an NJDOC [New Jersey Department of Corrections] Chaplain I have responded to no less than 5 officer suicides with 2 of them involving murder. Suicide for correctional chaplains is an ever-present danger, and the chaplain is often left to deal with those left behind wondering "why?"

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In the aftermath of one of the most recent NJDOC officer suicides the online paper, [www.NJ.com](http://www.NJ.com) reported that Correctional Officers are more than twice as likely to take their own life as they are to die in the

line of duty.<sup>1</sup> In a recent www.USAToday.com article it indicated that even the law enforcement culture is becoming alarmed at the growth of suicides inside their tight-knit armored community.<sup>2</sup> The article indicates that most officers are fearful of losing their jobs so they avoid counseling, confessions and simple conversations concerning their intentions for suicide. George Everly writes, “Law enforcement officers are 8.6 times more likely to die from suicide than from homicide and are 3.1 times more likely to die from suicide than from accidental circumstances (Violanti, 1996).”<sup>3</sup> I cite these statistics to verify that suicide crisis intervention for law enforcement chaplains is an ever present risk and the chaplain must develop effective tools to intervene or they will be tentative, reactionary or worse, become lost in a sea of confusion concerning suicide.

I agree with Szasz when Kanel quotes him as believing that everyone is ultimately responsible for herself or himself and that the nation’s policy on suicide “undermines the ethic of self-responsibility.” He goes on to equate prevention with coercion and sees it as a paternalistic attitude that develops privileges and powers to protect the suicidal individual. Szasz believes that the decision not to take one’s life is the client’s responsibility, not the mental health worker’s responsibility using abortion and divorce as parallel justifying concepts.<sup>4</sup>

But Szasz stops short of the true accountability factor. It is the responsibility of the person, but that responsibility is not that they are able to take their “own life.” The responsibility is to God because they are taking the life given to them by Him. Life is a precious gift granted by God to each individual and when it is taken by murder, abortion, suicide, etc., it is being taken from God.

It is this missing concept of “God’s value of life” that has brought our law enforcement agencies to one of the highest rates of suicide ever experienced. The lack of value for life as seen and given by God causes the correctional officers [and many inmates] to see their life as their own and therefore, they can take it freely as well as the life of others around them.

As Robert Stone echoes, “People who are neither influenced by nor committed to any religious group or belief system are freer to complete the act of suicide. Strong religious beliefs and regular involvement with some church or religious groups provide both emotional support and social constraint against suicide. Nevertheless, even deeply religious people sometimes take their own lives.”<sup>5</sup> This apathetic view of God creates trigger phrases like “Life isn’t worth living anymore,” and “There is no other way out,”<sup>6</sup> which should cause the crisis worker to see that the person is beginning to form the tunnel vision that accompanies suicide.

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Megerian, *Rate of suicide among corrections officers higher than police*. NJ.com, August 09, 2009. [http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2009/08/rate\\_of\\_suicide\\_among\\_correc.html](http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2009/08/rate_of_suicide_among_correc.html)

<sup>2</sup> John Ritter, *Suicide Rates Jolt Police Culture*, USATODAY.com 2/8/2007 [http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007\\_02\\_08-police-suicides\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007_02_08-police-suicides_x.htm)

<sup>3</sup> George S. Everly, *Pastoral Crisis Intervention*, (Ellicott City, MD: Chevron Pub., 2007), p. 3

<sup>4</sup> Kanel, Kristi. *A guide to crisis intervention* (3rd ed.) (New York: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 2006), p. 102-103

<sup>5</sup> Howard W. Stone, *Crisis Counseling* rev. ed. Minneapolis, MI: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), p. 65

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 66

Tunnel vision causes officers and others to believe that there is no value to life. As one officer states, “In effect, you become alone in a world filled with other people’s pain. You have no one you feel comfortable talking to about these matters and can’t admit you feel alone. You believe no one understands because no one sees the world as you do.”<sup>7</sup>

Concerning this tunnel vision, Clinton and Hawkins write,

“Suicidal individuals suffer from tunnel vision. They don’t see any option except death. To them, suicide is a “logical” thing to do. That’s why suicidal people sometimes take the lives of others as the kill themselves—they are not seeing the big picture. The goal of the crisis worker is not to invalidate their feelings of suicidal tendencies. To the person in crisis it is a very real option and choice. The goal is to get them to see the big picture, or more importantly, God’s picture. The problem is not that such despairing people want to die; it is that they do not know how to live—Gary P. Stewart. Many suicides are preventable. Most suicidal people desperately want to live; they are just unable to see alternatives to their problems—[www.suicidolgy.org](http://www.suicidolgy.org).<sup>8</sup>

As a crisis worker, the desire to live must be presented in a way that can be recognized and identified by the person in crisis. I am convinced that letting them know they are accountable for their actions, not you, will help them. Also, helping the person to see the bigger picture does not mean arguing with them or denying their very real sense of need for suicide. But it does often delay them and gets them to see things through another “tunnel.”

Everly suggests the following actions to take. Encourage acute coping or at least willingness to delay suicide. Clarify the intention by asking, “Do you really want to die?” Contradict the vision they have, that their outcome will be achieved. Delay but don’t argue. Give them time to reconsider and refer to others.<sup>9</sup>

I have applied what I call the three Vs of Victory. Without coercion or convincing them that suicide is wrong, take them to a new tunnel to see the value of life, the virtue of life, the valor in life and the victims of life.

**Value** – *meaning worth, importance, significance, meaning.*

Most suicidal people have lost or never had any value for life. Letting them know that you as well as God value life to the point where God preserves it, (Gen. 7:1-3) protects it, (Ps. 34:7, 17, 19) perpetrates it, (Gen 1:28) and will ultimately perfect it. (Col. 3:4) Discovering where the person finds value for life will provide some good assessment foundations. Letting them know that “they are valuable” to you, God and others starts to open the tunnel. To satisfy the need for belonging, build trust. Let them know that if God values them than you certainly do.

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<sup>7</sup> Dennis L. Conroy and Kären M. Hess, *Officers At Risk, How to Identify and Cope with STRESS*. (Placerville, CA: Custom Pub. Co., 1992), p. 158

<sup>8</sup> Tim Clinton and Ron Hawkins, *Biblical Counseling Quick Reference Guide*, (Forest, VA: AACC Press, 2007), p. 251-252.

<sup>9</sup> George S. Everly, *Pastoral Crisis Intervention*, (Ellicott City, MD: Chevron Pub., 2007), p.79

***Virtue*** – meaning an asset, desirable quality, worth, merit, goodness, benefit.

Letting them know that their worth is matchless when viewed considering the death burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ will widen the narrowness of their vision. John 3:16, For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. God values YOU so much that He willingly permitted His Son to pay the price for your life.

To satisfy the need for finding virtue, recognize their talents. Let them know that their life is valuable to God, society and others. There are no others that could take their place in God's purpose and plan for their life.

***Valor*** – courage, bravery, heroism, fearlessness, spirit.

When counseling correctional officers in crisis I draw them farther into a widening view of life by letting them know how much they are appreciated by others for their daily sacrifice of putting their lives on the line. As Christ said about men and women like this, John 15:13, *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*

To satisfy the need for self-determination, promote the power that comes from their daily sacrifice. They have the power to help, change and protect lives. They are part of a larger family who protect our families and our nation daily.

***Victim*** – injured party, sufferer, wounded, casualty.

Finally, with great caution, concern and sincerity, I acknowledge that there will be other victims of their act of suicide. We all suffer when officers take their lives, most importantly if the suffering of the immediate family.

To satisfy the need for charity, instill purpose found in their family, friends, and network of life relationships. Only their life can provide, preserve, protect and propagate life as designed and seen by God.

Yes, they are responsible for their own suicide. But it is God they must answer to, not the crisis worker. The crisis interventionist can only provide guidance, a grander view of God and life as it should be seen. Life is valuable, filled with many virtues, protected by men and women of valor. Suicide is the responsibility of the person, but we all are the victims when we fail to “save the life God has blessed this world with no matter who they may be.”

An illustration of finding the key components of tunnel vision prior to suicide and the means you may apply to open their eyes to existing the tunnel

