

## LEADERSHIP AFTER A POSSIBLE SUICIDE OR SUICIDE ATTEMPT

### *Sustaining Readiness and Caring for Unit Members*

When a service member is found injured or dead, the cause is often unknown. The cause may be a medical event, an accident, suicide, or suicide attempt. Leaders and unit members may feel uncertain about what to talk about, what not to talk about, and what to do. Below are actions to care for unit members and sustain readiness.

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#### **LISTEN (immediately and ongoing):**

- Listen to others, especially junior leaders. Learn what is known about the event and understand concerns.
- Make time to hear the concerns of people close to the service member, including friends, significant others, and parents.
- Understand what is known and public knowledge about the event to help you determine how to talk with different people. The exact language for different events (e.g., suicide vs accident; injury vs death) changes based on what people already know.
- Be alert to rumors. Often, they contain worries and beliefs (right or wrong) about an event. Address known facts and identify what is still unknown.
- Be sensitive to recent stressors or losses within the unit that may heighten worries about the current event.
- Meet with leaders from spouse and partner groups to identify additional unit stressors, as well as beliefs and reactions.
- Be aware that some people may blame themselves. People's last interaction with the person who died often frames their perspective and beliefs about their responsibility for or role in the death (e.g., "I could/should have...").
- Remember that people express grief, sadness, and anger in ways that may or may not be the same as you do. People's different backgrounds and cultures influence their reactions to the death.

#### **COMMUNICATE (first few hours and ongoing):**

- Express the unit's loss. Speak also of the positive aspects of the person.
- Emphasize that "caring for each other" is an important part of being a service member (e.g., listen to people's difficult emotions, encourage self-care, help people with problem-solving).
- Remind people where they can get help if they want to talk with someone (e.g., command leaders, behavioral health, chaplains).
- Remember that it's okay to express emotions when you speak. Your emotions may help others express theirs.
- Say what is known and avoid speculating:
  - » Following a death, say "Our team member was found dead" or "Our team member was found with a gunshot wound to the head."
  - » Following a personal injury, say "Our team member was found injured and taken for medical care."
  - » Avoid drawing conclusions, such as, "This was a suicide."
- Avoid describing explicit details about the method of injury or death.
- Provide opportunities to talk regularly and offer support to persons involved (e.g., people close to or involved in discovery of the service member)
- Repeat key messages. In high stress situations, people do not remember things as well as they do in more normal times.
- Before talking with family members, it can be helpful to talk with other people about how you will approach the conversation as you decide what to say and how to say it.

*Continued*

### **ACT (hours, days, and weeks):**

- Identify key stressors and consider their impact on the unit.
  - Mitigate stressors when possible (e.g., lack of sleep, high op tempo, lack of time off, separation from home, changes in leadership or unit members).
  - Be present and visible by walking around and talking with your service members. Person-to-person communication is important.
  - Encourage self-care (e.g., eat regular meals, get restful sleep, manage stress) and be a role model by practicing self-care yourself. If people see you doing this, it will remind them that it's okay for them to practice self-care as well.
  - Remind unit members that people have different feelings (e.g., sadness, confusion, anger, guilt) and these often change over time.
- Temporarily lowering the unit op tempo can create opportunities for unit members to be together and sustain cohesion by discussing concerns and supporting one another.
  - Remind unit members to reach out to a person who is not acting like themselves, is more distant, is not talking, or is talking excessively. Say, "You don't seem like yourself. What's up?"
  - Provide junior leaders with ongoing and updated information. Encourage them to ask any questions and share concerns.
  - Ask chaplains to be present in the unit (walking around) and at briefings to check in with unit members and remind them support services are available through multiple channels.
  - Seek out a peer or mentor who can listen or offer support or advice about how to manage the stress and uncertainty of the event.