

Suicide Prevention Has to Start Before the Crisis

We continue to lose members of law enforcement, the military, fire rescue, EMS, emergency communications, and other public safety professions. If we want that to change, the conversation has to begin long before someone reaches a breaking point.

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Every time we lose someone in law enforcement, the military, fire rescue, EMS, emergency communications, or another public safety profession to suicide, why do we find ourselves having the same conversations?

We talk about stigma. We share resources. We remind everyone that it is okay to ask for help. Some of us check on coworkers, and it seems like every single time, we collectively acknowledge that we need to do better.

All of this matters. But are we spending too much time talking about suicide after someone reaches a crisis? Are we doing enough to address what we can before that actually happens?

Suicide prevention cannot begin when someone becomes suicidal. It has to begin much earlier.

Trauma Does Not Care About Your Job Title

Those working in law enforcement, the military, fire rescue, EMS, and the many support functions surrounding these professions can find themselves routinely exposed to situations most people simply do not often experience.

The conversation should not stop with those traditionally considered to be on the front line.

What about the call taker who heard the screaming before anyone arrived? The dispatcher who listened to a law enforcement officer pleading for help? The crime scene investigator who spent hours documenting the aftermath? The forensic professionals and prosecutors repeatedly examining images and evidence involving violence, death, and abuse?

They may all experience an incident differently, but they are still exposed to trauma and human suffering. So many people work behind the scenes, and they deserve a seat at the wellness table.

Sometimes It Is Not One Call

We also need to stop looking for the single incident that caused someone to struggle.

Sometimes there isn't one.

It is one child death, then another. Another suicide. Another horrific crash. Another grieving family. Another shift without enough sleep. Another missed birthday. Another argument at home.

Then add organizational and personal stress.

Poor leadership. Staffing shortages. Forced overtime. Internal Affairs investigations. Relationship problems. Financial pressures. Career uncertainty. Retirement. Loss of identity.

Each can be stressful on its own. Together, they can accumulate into something much heavier.

For too many people, acknowledging that they are struggling creates another source of stress. They worry about what it could mean for their assignment, security clearance, ability to carry a duty weapon, promotion, reputation, or career as a whole.

We cannot encourage people to ask for help while maintaining cultures that make them afraid of the consequences when they do.

Stop Waiting for People to Break

We maintain equipment before it fails. We train before emergencies happen. We prepare for foreseeable problems. Waiting until something breaks does not make sense. Yet when it comes to mental health, we seem to wait for a crisis before taking any action.

A wellness check-in should not automatically mean something is wrong. Talking with a culturally competent mental health professional should not be reserved for a crisis. Peer support should not only appear after a critical incident. It needs to be taken seriously, built around the right people, and grounded in trust and a genuine understanding of confidentiality.

This does not mean turning everyone into a patient or everyone into a therapist.

Someone can struggle without having a disorder. They can be affected by a call without having PTSD. They may need to talk without needing formal therapy, and they can benefit from therapy while remaining completely capable of doing their job.

The goal should be providing multiple options to turn to long before anyone reaches a crisis.

Leadership and Connection Matter

Sometimes the first person to recognize that someone is struggling is not a therapist or a loved one.

It might be the dispatcher sitting at the next console. The officer or deputy in the passenger seat or arriving as backup on the call. The firefighter across the table. The military veteran noticing a teammate withdrawing.

A conversation may not solve someone's problems, but it can remind them that someone noticed. Sometimes simply being noticed means the world to someone struggling in silence.

Leadership matters too.

Organizations can create wellness programs, peer support teams, and policies, but those efforts mean very little if the culture still punishes vulnerability, treats asking for help as weakness, or fails to put the right people in positions where trust, compassion, and confidentiality are paramount.

Leaders do not need to become therapists. They need to know those they are supposed to lead, recognize changes, understand available resources, and create an environment where seeking support is viewed as responsible.

How We Respond After a Suicide Matters Too

There is another uncomfortable part of this conversation that we need to address: what happens after we lose one of our own.

We have seen very different approaches. Some agencies publicly acknowledge the loss, honor the person's service, support the family, and give coworkers and loved ones the opportunity to grieve with the support of their organization. Others say very little. In some cases, the loss is not publicly acknowledged at all.

There are legitimate considerations involving family wishes, privacy, and the responsible communication of suicide. The manner of death should never be sensationalized or glorified.

But acknowledging someone's life and service is not the same as honoring suicide.

The way someone died should not erase the years, or even decades, they spent serving their community or country. Their service still mattered. Their coworkers are still grieving. Their family still deserves support.

Silence sends a message too. When an organization does not acknowledge a loss, particularly while saying "it's okay to not be okay," it risks reinforcing the very stigma everyone claims they are trying to eliminate.

We can do better. We can acknowledge a loss responsibly, honor a person's service, respect the wishes and privacy of their family, and stand with those left behind.

Something Has to Change

There is no single program, training, clinician, peer support team, or policy that will eliminate suicide. But that does not mean we are powerless.

We can normalize preventative mental health care. We can strengthen peer support and make sure the right people are providing it. We can train leaders differently, protect confidentiality, support families, recognize cumulative trauma, and include those working behind the scenes who have been excluded from these conversations for far too long.

There is personal responsibility too.

Whatever title is on your uniform, credential, ID card, business card, or email signature, you are a human being first. We need to know our limits and our resources. We need to recognize when something is changing in ourselves and in those around us. Asking for help should not be something we postpone until someone else realizes we are drowning.

And when we do lose someone, we should remember that the way they died does not define the entirety of how they lived or served.

Most importantly, we have to stop defining suicide prevention as something that begins when someone wants to die.

It begins much earlier.

It begins with culture. It begins with leadership. It begins with connection. It begins with prevention. It begins with organizations genuinely taking care of their team, and each of us taking care of ourselves and one another. It begins with us.

Suicide is not the answer, and no one should have to reach a breaking point before we start taking care of them.

About Warrior Spirit Health and Wellness

Warrior Spirit Health and Wellness was created from the culmination of many unplanned and unpredictable life experiences that ultimately developed into understanding, passion, and a desire to help others.

That mission continues today: to support those who serve, those who have served, their families, and those working alongside them, before reaching a crisis.

About the Author

Richard Best, M.A., is the founder of Warrior Spirit Health and Wellness and a retired law enforcement officer. He currently serves as a commissioned officer in the U.S. Coast Guard and works in the mental health field in Florida.

Since 2015, he has also served as founder and president of a nonprofit organization dedicated to honoring law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty and assisting their agencies and families, with peer support becoming a vital part of that mission in 2018.

His work focuses on mental health, wellness, and resilience within law enforcement, the military, public safety, and the families and professionals who support these communities.