



The Safety Corner

From the Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned March 23, 2007



Suicide Prevention

This issue of the Safety Corner highlights observations about suicide rates during operations in the Global War on Terrorism.

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From the Director: Suicide is something we would all rather not have to talk about and deal with personally. But looking back on my 27 years in the Marine Corps unfortunately there have been several occasions when suicides have happened at my base or with a sister unit. I would caution everyone to not think this is something that happens to others and ignore the potential threat.

In 2005, the Marine Corps suffered a 29% increase in suicides, the highest total in a decade. However, suicide rates within the military are about half those in the general military aged population. The suicide rate for military members during 2005 was 11 per 100,000, which compares to 19.5 per 100,000, the national average for Americans in the 20-44 year age group. Thirty one Marines committed suicide in 2004, with the majority being under 25; another 83 attempted suicide.

Attempted suicide/suicide is not just a Marine Corps problem, but also affects our fellow Sailors, Airman and Soldiers. There is no one single reason for these deaths. In many cases, a person is overwhelmed by relationship problems, financial problems, depression, or alcohol, and might see suicide as the only way out. And while there's no indication that deployments increase the likelihood of suicide, they do add additional stress to the troops.

As leaders we must reinforce the fact that it's ok to get help, and defuse the stigma that seeking help makes you appear weak or could be a career ender. As our operational tempo increases, and Marines return from their second, third and sometimes their fourth rotation fighting the Global War on Terrorism, we must relay to our Marines that suicide is never the answer.

I look forward to your comments, observations, and concerns.

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Hard facts: Attempted Suicides in the first 11 days of FY07

3 Jan LCpl Overdose on pills; 4 Jan Cpl Self inflicted laceration to Right wrist; 7 Jan Pfc Overdose on pills; 8 Jan LCpl Overdose on over the counter Meds; 9 Jan Pfc Overdose on Alcohol and pills; 11 Jan LCpl Overdose on pills

Related Links: Air Force Suicide Prevention Program - <https://www.afms.mil/afsp>

Army Suicide Prevention Program(In Progress)

Coast Guard Suicide Prevention Program - http://www.uscg.mil/d13/units/gruastoria/pow%20files/suicide_awareness.htm

Marine Corps Suicide Prevention Program - <http://www.usmc-mccs.org/perssvc/prevent/suicide.asp>

Navy Suicide Prevention Program - <http://www.persnet.navy.mil/PERS601/>

American Association of Suicidology - <http://www.suicidology.org/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/suifacts.htm>

National Institute of Mental Health - <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/>

A Marine in trouble is never abandoned. Leaders at all levels must be vigilant for warning signs of problems that can escalate into suicidal behavior. We must do everything to reinforce the message that it's ok to get help. **General J. L. JONES**

Warning Signs to Watch For

Sadness	A change in personality	Talking about death
Drastic changes in behavior	Trouble eating or sleeping	Giving away possessions
Making final dispositions of affairs	Hoarding medications	Taking unnecessary risk
Talking about "having a plan" or "method" of suicide		Recently had a severe loss

The observations and recommendations contained in The Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned (MCCLL) Safety Corner represent the considered judgment of Marines who have identified safety issues in their units. The purpose of this newsletter is to apprise other Marines of these safety recommendations and to encourage them to enter their own lessons into the Marine Corps Lessons Management System (LMS).



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Warrior Preparation Brief

This Brief identifies some of the signs of stress. Although, stress is normal for Marines on tough operational deployments, these signs of stress are usually temporary.

<http://www.usmc-mccs.org/cosc/docs/Warrior%20Transition%20Brief%2026%20Oct%2006.ppt>

Pre-Return Stress Brief for Leaders

Leaders should pay attention to mental health issues after deployment just like they do other issues such as, hydration. It is every unit leader's responsibility to look after their Marines. Readjustment and mental health problems will occur. It is the job of the unit leaders to pay attention to this and involve chaplains, mental health experts and MCCS for assistance.

<http://www.usmc-mccs.org/downloads/warrior/Re-Deployment%20Leadership%20Training.ppt>

Combat/Operational Stress – Information for Marines

Identifies resources for help for pre-deployments and post-deployments.

<http://www.usmc-mccs.org/cosc/63619-usmc.pdf>

Learn to Shield Yourself From The Effects of Stress

Everyone experiences stress - it's a natural part of life. Stress is your physical, emotional and mental response to changes, challenges and circumstances. The daily work pressures and family demands in our fast-paced society create stress. So do situations such as ill health in yourself or a loved one, financial difficulties and even happy events such as a job promotion.

Stress isn't all bad, without it, we would not be motivated to get things done. However, excessive stress can cause health problems and affect your ability to work safely. Stress can lower your ability to fight off infectious diseases. Chronic illnesses such as ulcers and heart disease can be linked to long-term stress.

A stressed, worried state of mind can distract you from your mission. Have you ever had a near-accident when driving while your mind was on a problem instead of the road? Accidents can happen in the same manner if you are anxious about problems in or out of theater. You can't escape stress, but you can learn to handle it better to minimize its harmful effects.

Try these tips For developing greater resistance to stress

- Get the big picture instead of worrying about small problems you can't fix. Ask yourself, "How important is it?" and "Will this be important tomorrow or next year?"
- As for the problems you can't solve at the moment, try to put them out of your mind until you can do something constructive about them.
- Think positively. While accepting the possibility of the worst happening, try to anticipate the best.
- Learn to manage your time better, so you are not faced with last-minute scrambles. If you have to move a mountain, do it a bit at a time each day.
- Get enough sleep. Cutting your sleep schedule is not a good way to deal with stress.
- Find some time for recreation every day.
- Exercise regularly. A daily walk or a gym workout several times a week can help keep you strong and better able to deal with stress.
- Take it easy on drinks containing caffeine, alcoholic beverages and other drugs. All of these tend to make you feel more anxious in the long run.

PHYSICAL	COGNITIVE	EMOTIONAL	SOCIAL	SPIRITUAL
Heat/Cold	Being hyper-focused	Fear of injury or death	Away from loved ones and friends	Life doesn't make sense like it used to
Dehydration	Boredom	Fear of failure	Loss of personal space	Challenge of faith
Sleep deprivation	Lack of information	Hatred of the enemy	Isolation	Challenge of purpose
Injury	Uncertainty	Guilt and shame		
Marines adapting to stress may look and act the same as they always do!				



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The War Comes Home: Rifleman Couldn't Take Any More

Ken Dennis was fresh out of the Marines, finally out of Iraq, flailing financially and filing for divorce from a wife who ran off with a fellow Marine. The combat rifleman wasn't sleeping much: nightmares. He had tried counseling but only briefly, then he had given up on it.

"At the mall Ken said, 'I just don't want to see 23 after all of this' and then he changed subjects in a second," said his father, Joe Dennis, a journalist in Ephrata who plays and replays that strange fly-by conversation in his mind. His son didn't see 23. On March 21, exactly one year after the first Marine combat deaths in Iraq, the wiry 6-foot-1 soldier who had been a classroom cut-up, a devotee of heavy philosophical tomes and a proud patriot tattooed with the Marine Corps insignia hanged himself from a showerhead in the bathroom of his Renton apartment.

His best friend, Abram Hoffmeister, found him in the bathtub, a belt around his neck. Hoffmeister, best buddies with Ken since kindergarten in Ephrata had recently set his friend up with an auditing job at the Renton insurance company where he worked. He said Ken was putting in long hours, striving to excel and was starting to talk about the future, not the past. "He'd been depressed until he got the job, but then he seemed excited, happy," said Hoffmeister. "It's not like he was talking suicide or anything."

"The Marine Corps experiences a different life, fewer creature comforts, more deployments, field time and time away from home. That puts added stress on people," said Bryan Driver, a spokesman at Marine Corps headquarters. Numbers show a rate of 13.2 suicides out of 100,000 Marines for 2003 not including attempted suicides.

"The guys coming home their world can start to unravel, it all feels unreal. Specialty counselors say comments from civilian outsiders can be unnerving, including the most common and, according to some returning soldiers, "dumbest" of questions: "So did you kill anybody?" When kids popped it out during a high school presentation Ken Dennis gave in Ephrata, the hard-core Marine was shaken. "We were in combat it happened," he answered carefully.

The young corporal who had served in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia and Djibouti and had been part of the first Marine presence in Iraq last year had always been headstrong. The kid who holed up in his room to read Winston Churchill's five-volume set on World War II dropped out of high school and checked into an alternative school in 10th grade. Drawn to the idea of being one of, "The Few, The Proud," he entered the Marines at 18, and completed the second half of boot camp with pneumonia, running the final endurance tests with a broken foot, laced up tight in his boot. "He was one tough kid," said his father.

He was 100 percent behind the U.S. effort overseas. "He wasn't just there because of duty. He felt it was something we need to do for the security of our country," said his father. Nevertheless, scenes from Iraq haunted him. "He always had that bit of a shadow in the back of his mind. 'Did I shoot a fedayeen or did I shoot a civilian?'" said his father, who was later reassured by fellow Marine unit members that his son wasn't a "cowboy," and had taken out only armed combatants. The rifleman's concern was no anomaly.

Hoffmeister believes his buddy, honorably discharged from the Marines in mid-January, could have dealt with combat fallout, if it hadn't been tangled up in the collapse of his marriage. Marriage breakups among combat soldiers are common. And Ken's breakup was particularly nasty, according to his family and friends. He adored his wife, supported her financially, gave her the keys to his car. But after things soured back home, she ran off with a Marine from his squad, a former friend who had served in Iraq with Ken, friends and family said.

The stung young veteran began to hit the bars hard in Renton. Reluctant to talk about Iraq experiences when sober, he couldn't stop talking about them and the wife who had "done him wrong" after one too many tequilas. Hoffmeister grew weary of listening, he admits. "After a while, I got agitated hearing about his ex-wife, so I discouraged him from talking about it. I think that was the worst. He needed to talk that out with a counselor."

Ken's family said he apparently did meet briefly with a counselor in the Marines, and was undoubtedly aware of mental health services offered through the service, but opted not to take advantage of them. "He was a very stubborn person," said his father. "That's why he was able to accomplish so much, but it was also a liability. "It put him in a situation where he was unwilling, at some emotional level, to reach out and accept help."

Ken's father notes that his son's divorce would have been final June 24, the date of the 23rd birthday he would never see. His buddy Hoffmeister remembers Ken diving into books on existentialism toward the end. He was also deep into the letters and journals of another suicide victim, '90s punk guru Kurt Cobain. "It was weird," said Hoffmeister.

He wonders, too, if the movie they watched the night before the suicide, with an actress who looked like Ken's wife, was a trigger. A half-hour into the movie, "The Truth About Charlie," Ken abruptly got up and left. That night, or early the next morning, the rifleman put the belt around his neck and opted out of the world he had left as a young gung-ho Marine.