

The Night I Tried To Kill Myself

"My name is Will, and I've been in the Navy for 11 years now. Three weeks ago, I tried to take my own life. This story looks at the poor decisions that led to my actions, alcohol's part in my attempt, and ways to prevent those who read this article from doing what I did.

"I have been very lucky. My command and my doctors have dedicated themselves to helping me get better and continue a career I have loved since I started it. I hope this firsthand account of what I did and its consequences may help other Sailors in trouble recognize their options for handling anger or depression."

Will has battled chronic depression most of his life. At times, it's hard for him to keep his Navy job. Other times, he feels OK—like there's nothing stopping him from achieving whatever goals he sets for himself. These mood swings are aggravated by stress and fear of failure. Here is Will's story as he related it to me in an attachment to the foregoing e-mail note.—Ed.

In today's Navy, Sailors regularly receive training about suicide. We are told about the warning signs and what causes suicidal thoughts. As a senior petty officer and supervisor, I knew what to look for in my colleagues' behavior. I also knew the right avenues to get someone help if they needed it. None

of the training, however, prepared me for what to do when I was in an emergency room getting my stomach pumped after trying to end my own life. This story is an effort to reach those of you in the fleet who might be at the point where you think there's no other choice left. I know you're there, because I was.

In early March, while away from homeport, I slid into a heavy depression. I went so far as to buy some whiskey, take out my anti-depression medication, and consider taking it all. At the time, I was sober and smart enough to realize death wouldn't solve anything. That night, I threw away the alcohol and put away my pills. I wasn't aware I had just rehearsed my own suicide attempt. Afraid that admitting I needed help would hurt my career, I kept my mouth shut.

On March 17, following several unpleasant surprises in my private life, I went to a local store and bought five bottles of cheap wine. I sat down in my apartment while my roommates were asleep upstairs and proceeded to drink myself into oblivion. By 2 p.m., I had finished enough wine to lapse into an alcoholic blackout—my first.

In the next 20 hours, my actions became increasingly self-destructive. I began shouting at my friends as they tried to keep me out of trouble. My mood swung from manic to depressed in minutes, only to swing back again seconds later. Finally, my friends decided they couldn't do anything else for me. Truthfully, I was such a jerk by that point, I think they left me alone to get a break from my temper tantrums.

I'd like to tell you what I was thinking when I finished swallowing a full bottle of 90 pills, but the alcohol had wiped out all but a few images. I can remember looking at the empty pill bottle in my hand and realizing what I'd just done. I also remember feeling absolutely ecstatic at the idea that, once the pills and booze took effect, I'd die. I remember praying for forgiveness and wanting to fall asleep forever.

By the time one of my roommates came downstairs, I had lost consciousness. He saw the empty pill bottle and immediately called 911. He then shook me awake and kept talking to me until an ambulance arrived. I was furious with him at the time and begged him to walk away and just let me die. I repeatedly said the same thing to the ambulance crew and to the emergency-room staff.

In the hospital, staffers were forced to pump my stomach. It took several of them to hold me—screaming and fighting—while they pushed the tube down my throat. In the process, I bruised my shins and arms and scratched my throat. When they began pumping water into me, I was forced to watch everything pour up my throat and down my shirt into the bin they held under my mouth. Once they were sure I was empty, they forced charcoal into my stomach through the tube to neutralize anything left. They also drew a blood sample, which revealed my BAC was .21—well into intoxication.

From the emergency room, I went to a care unit at a naval hospital, but I don't remember being moved there. I woke up in a bed, closely monitored, with a bag of IV fluids dripping into my arm. That evening and for the next week, my CO, XO, division officer, medical officer, and command master chief all visited, giving me their full support. Other shipmates also came to see me, and my entire first-class mess sent along their best wishes and support. It was the first time I had to address the selfishness of what I had done. I had considered only what would happen to me. I never thought about the damage I was doing to those who cared for and depended on me.

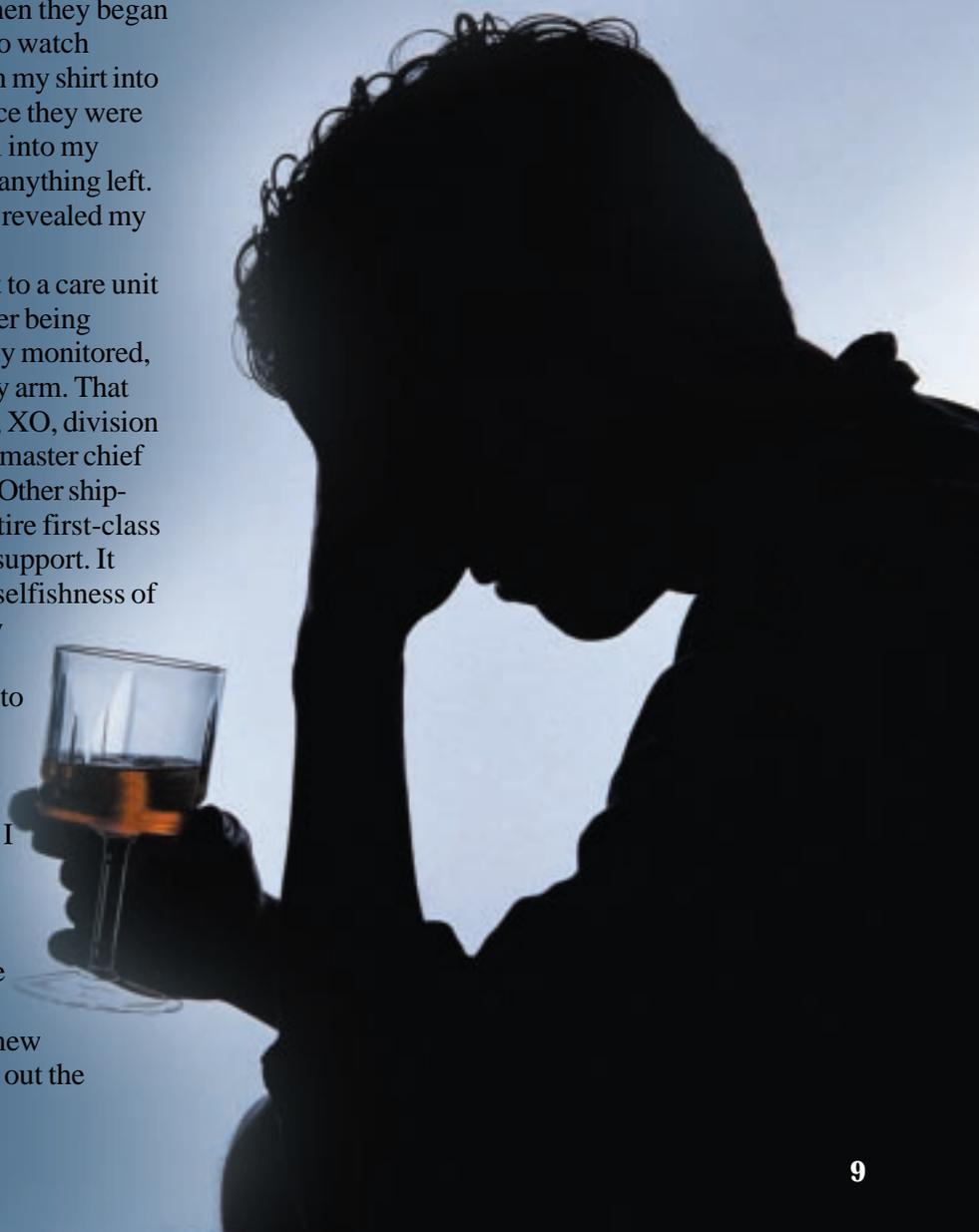
Hospital staffers pumped fluids through me for two days to make sure I would be all right. At night, when I would try to sleep, I would have mild convulsions and spasms, possibly from the alcohol or from the pills. During the day, nurses would come along with needles—to draw blood and to set up new IVs, because I would accidentally tear out the

old ones when I moved. Then there was the embarrassment of being watched constantly. At the end of the observation period, when they were sure I'd be OK physically, they moved me upstairs.

During much of my career, friends and I have joked about the fifth floor of the local naval hospital being the psych ward—the place they send people with mental and emotional problems. Now, after all the jokes, I was locked into this ward, where you can't keep a razor or any personal items. My bedroom door had no curtains so the staff could keep a close eye on me. It was in this ward that the true process of healing started.

Each day, other patients and I attended classes and encounter groups, exposing us to the skills we would need to help ourselves. Doctors visited daily, and corpsmen and instructors constantly supervised us. By the end of the first day, I knew I needed what they had to offer, and I participated fully.

It was rough, and some of the patients didn't want to face their problems. Others wanted to get





No matter what your pain is or what causes it, you are not alone.

out of the Navy and wouldn't cooperate, but they had to stay, week after week, while the doctors tried to reach them. I soon came to realize my problems weren't as bad as I had thought. Because I had refused to tell anyone that something was wrong, I made my problems worse, which led to a pattern of self-delusion. I became convinced that suicide could be a solution. With this realization, I was ready to start helping myself get better. After five days in the ward, I had earned the privilege of going home.

What did I learn, and, more importantly, what can you learn from what happened to me? First, communicate with those around you. My depression could have been solved if I simply had told my supervisors that I had a problem. The men and women aboard my ship had done everything they were supposed to do. They were available to help me and would have been glad to listen and help; however, I hid my thoughts from them. Once I arrived at the hospital, all my shipmates were there for me, and it was obvious they would have stepped in much earlier if only they had known.

Second, alcohol and depression do not mix. If you feel depressed, drinking will not make you happy

long enough to get over your problems. Once I had drunk enough wine to black out, there was nothing to stop me from doing things I later would regret. Oh, I know you've heard that before; I've been listening to anti-drinking messages for years. Take my advice: Once you have that first drink, you're on a very dangerous path. You're assuming that, once you're drunk, you'll remember enough of your goals and morals to avoid doing stupid things.

It wasn't my friends' responsibility to guard or stop me. They did what they could out of friendship, but the ultimate cause of my suicide attempt was my conscious decision to drink too much. Don't make that mistake; don't give yourself that excuse to do harm to yourself or to the ones you love. I didn't permanently damage any of my friendships, but you may not be as lucky.

Finally, never forget that your death will not help anything at all. It's not just your life. My roommate had to watch me slipping away in front of him, lying on his couch and begging him to let me go. He still has trouble talking to me, and I had to move to a new residence for everyone's peace of mind. One of my friends, a survivor of a loved one's suicide, called me in tears while I was in the hospital. The woman I love had to come to the hospital room and face me while coping with feelings of guilt and anger over what I had done. Obviously, the lingering pain of that week has not helped our relationship.

My command was affected, from the CO and master chief, all the way down to the new Sailors who look to me for supervision and leadership. My death certainly wouldn't have aided them in any way. And then, there's my family. Even my ex-wife cried when I told her what I had done. And, how will I ever explain to my three beautiful children what their daddy did?

I know someone reading this feels like their life is over—they can't see the future, or they don't like what they see. There are work problems, life problems, relationship problems, all kinds of pressure and pain. Please, if you can't find any other message in my story, take this with you: No matter what your pain is or what causes it, you are not alone. Everyone around you feels pain sometimes. Everyone around you wants something they can't have. And, the thoughts and emotions you may be feeling aren't weird, abnormal or bad. People all around you are counting on you to be there. Those people—your shipmates, your chain of command, your friends, your family, your loved ones, your God—are all waiting beside you. All you have to do is ask for their help. Give them a chance. ■