



# Police Suicide

Police officers, especially males, are at increased risk for suicide, according to Canada's *Occupational Health and Safety Magazine*. Despite this awareness, the prevalence rate of suicides in Canadian police officers is not fully known. For a variety of reasons, this information is not identified and compiled across Canada.

Psychological autopsies are oftentimes not performed but it is believed that, for some, suicide is an answer to the question "How do I get out of this torturous existence I live in?" It is the one act they feel they can control in a life that feels outside of their control.

## Suicide and the police culture

Suicide by any person is incredibly tragic but police suicides are particularly so. Officers are often viewed as the strongest, most stoic members of society. This is the problem. They seem to absorb this public image that they are invulnerable. The conflict between public image and inner feelings of vulnerability can be excruciating.

As a male-dominated profession it is important to consider the influence of male socialization. This can even be applied to women who work in this historically "male" profession. Think about some of the things people say to little boys (and girls too) when they are growing up – "Don't cry," "Stop crying," "Crying is for babies," "If you don't have something nice to say, don't say anything"... the list goes on and on. We've been taught to shut down and deny how we feel if it is a "negative" emotion. We might make other people uncomfortable because they don't know what to do for us or feel they can't offer what we need.

Add to these historical teachings the messages we might get from our employer and co-workers (whether intended or not) – "He/She's off work mad" and "He/She's screwed. They're never going to get that promotion now." This traps officers into feeling they can't talk about their difficulties. They believe the only choice is to suck it up until they can no longer do that.

## Recognizing suicide risk

Some well-known indicators that people are considering suicide include saying goodbyes, getting one's business in order, withdrawing socially and talking about suicide, either directly or indirectly. This could include expressing a lack of hope, such as "What's the point?," "It never ends," "I can't wait until it's all over" – or comments about being helpless, such as "I can't do anything right" and "I have no control over anything." Increased substance use, deteriorating hygiene and emotional volatility also suggest possible suicide risk. Persons facing problems that are unsolvable, or at least appear to be, are also at heightened risk.

Some of the less-common signs for suicide are taking excessive risks at work in hopes of being accidentally killed or an abrupt improvement

in mood. This improvement comes because a person is no longer struggling with the indecision about suicide. They have decided and are experiencing a brief sense of peace since they know their suffering is "almost over." This sign tends to shock family and friends after the completed suicide, as they will report that the person seemed to be doing better.

## Dealing with suicidal thoughts

If you find yourself thinking suicide is the only option, you are not alone. Many people have moments when suicide seems to be their only source of relief. It is a desperate time and when things get this bad, it seems like the pain will NEVER end. Yet nothing, other than death, is permanent – not pain, happiness, sunshine or rain. You may think it's hopeless and that you are helpless to change your circumstances but neither is true.

I encourage you to reach out and ask for the support you need and deserve. I have had people show up at my counselling office unannounced (not my clients at the time) as a last-ditch effort to get help before they made the irreversible decision to end their lives. I asked them what I am now asking of you – give therapy a try. Talk to someone. What do you have to lose? More

importantly, what do you have to gain?

If you think someone you know is contemplating suicide, I encourage you to tell them they are not alone. Tell them you are concerned for them and would like to help in some way. Ask them what they need. You may not be able to give it to them but you can help them find it.

Don't pretend that you fully understand. In fact, say that you don't understand but want to. Ask them if it's okay if you check with them again later in the week and then follow through. Get support from someone else to help you help this person – a peer support team member, mental health professional, family member, trusted friend and/or pastor.

Badge of Life Canada is a great source for connecting with support across the country.

Police suicide devastates the lives of so many people. We must make every effort as a law enforcement family to get informed, care for and support each other and speak up about mental health issues before it's too late.

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