

Firefighter suicide prevention: The company officer's role

By Linda Willing

Suicide is not a topic that most people want to talk about, but the suicide last month of a prominent [Philadelphia firefighter](#) has brought the subject into public discussion.

Suicide is not uncommon among members of the fire service. The Phoenix Fire Department, for example, recently had [four suicides](#) among its members in the space of less than a year.

Why do people kill themselves? Who knows. Even those who are closest to the person who has died may never solve the mystery of exactly what led to that person's death.

Like most people, firefighters often experience stress, some of it job related, some of it personal, and some of it in that crossover zone between work and home life.

Certainly being away from home for days at a time is often not good for relationships among couples and families. In addition, many firefighters feel an obligation to act nonchalant and macho, as if things don't really get to them, when in fact they may truly be suffering.

Feeling that they cannot reveal vulnerability to their peers can lead to a sense of isolation. A sense of alienation or isolation is often a factor that contributes to suicidal intention.

Support systems

Well-connected people with good support systems can feel desperate too, but they usually don't kill themselves. They can see other ways of dealing with difficult situations, and have confidence that they will have support in doing so.

It is not a company officer's place to play the role of psychologist in the station. Few are trained in this field, and without training and experience, well-intentioned actions can sometimes do more harm than good.

However, company officers can do several very important things that can lessen the risk of suicide and other dangerous behaviors among their crew members.

Specifically, company officers can foster an environment in the fire station that is supportive and inclusive to all members of the crew. This does not mean that everyone has to link arms and sing Kumbayah every morning, but it does mean that the officer should be vigilant about whether individuals are being isolated, taunted, or just ignored.

Company officers have the most contact with individual members of their crews, and are likely to notice signs of change among them. A person with a good work ethic suddenly starts coming to work late or not at all. A person with a happy family life is suddenly evasive when asked about his wife or children. A normally good natured person is suddenly prone to outbursts of anger.

These are all warning signs that should not be ignored or glossed over.

What can a company officer do? A little focused feedback can go a long way. For example, the officer could simply approach the coworker privately and say something like, "I notice that you blew up at Frank just now. That's not like you. Is something going on?"

The other person may not respond to this overture, but at least you have indicated your awareness of the situation and opened the door for communication.

Open to talk

One thing that every company officer should be saying to his or her crew is this: "If something is bothering you, you can always come and talk to me one-on-one and I will listen to you and take you seriously."

Many officers assume that their crews know this about them, but most firefighters will not assume this type of access unless it is explicitly stated by the officer.

If a company officer strongly suspects that a member of the crew might be suicidal, that officer should not try to handle the situation alone. Some workplace behaviors, such as threats of violence, unsafe work practices, and drug or alcohol abuse, demand intervention at a higher level.

People who are truly suicidal are dangerous, and at least one well-meaning officer lost his own life when he tried to intervene alone with a deeply troubled coworker.

Company officers must know what resources are available for firefighters with serious personal problems, such as Employee Assistance Programs. They must also be realistic about recognizing the severity of a particular problem and asking for help in dealing with it.

Suicide is a mystery. The person with the answers is gone and all that is left behind is loss and grief and pain. The company officer is not responsible if a member of the crew commits suicide. But that officer is in a position to do some good beforehand and possibly help to prevent a tragic outcome.

About the author

Linda F. Willing worked for more than 20 years in the emergency services, including 18 as a career firefighter and fire officer. For the past 10 years, she has provided support for fire and emergency services and other organizations through her company, [RealWorld Training and Consulting](#). Linda's work focuses on developing customized solutions in the areas of leadership development, conflict resolution, diversity management, team building, communications and decision making. Linda is also an adjunct instructor and curriculum advisor for the National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer Program. She has a B.A. in American Studies from the University of Pennsylvania, an M.S. from Regis University in Denver in Organization Development, and is a certified mediator. To contact Linda, e-mail Linda.Willing@FireRescue1.com.

