

12 Red Flags of Suicide Chaplains Need to Know

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Chaplains are uniquely positioned to help USAR Soldiers who are at risk of Suicide for at least two reasons: (1) They have absolute confidentiality which makes them a safe person to talk with, and (2) Unlike other helping resources, chaplains are down at the BN level across the USAR. These two factors combine to make Chaplains the primary “go-to” resource across the USAR when it comes to Soldiers at risk of suicide.

Problem: After talking with many USAR Chaplains who have had a Soldier commit suicide within their organization, and after reviewing the 15-6 investigations, I am seeing 2 patterns: (1) Most Soldiers who commit suicide present 3-4 “red flags” (out of a list of 12); and (2) Many chaplains report something to the effect, “The Soldier did not give any indication they were going to kill themselves.”

Because Soldiers usually do not tell anyone they are going to kill themselves, recommend Chaplains proactively and caringly inquire of organizational leaders and “Joes” alike which Soldiers are experiencing the “Red Flags” of Soldier suicide. If a Soldier presents 2 or more of these Red Flags, they should be on your watch list.

1. **Financial Hardship** – It may be difficult to believe, but some USAR Soldiers who have committed suicide were homeless and living in their vehicles.
2. **Relationship Woes** – This can be both romantic break-ups and/or estrangement from friends or close family members.
3. **Divorce** – especially a current or recent separation.
4. **Legal Actions** – It is surprising to me how many Soldiers who commit suicide are facing some sort of legal action such as domestic abuse, DWI, etc.
5. **Adverse Unit Actions** – Many Soldiers who commit suicide are flagged, facing UCMJ or a GOMAR, etc. This info should be readily accessible to the unit chaplain if they would only ask, but often the CH does not know.
6. **Depression/Anxiety**
7. **History of Mental Health Issues** – CHs are encouraged to liaison with S1 and identify those Soldiers with a 2 or 3 under the “S” of PULHES.
8. **Unemployed or Under-employed** – In 2017, 48% of USAR Soldiers who committed Suicide were unemployed or under-employed.

9. **History of Abuse/Traumatic Experiences** – Most Soldiers who take their life have not been deployed, but many have experienced some sort of trauma outside of combat.

10. **Unsatisfactory Participation** – Ask your unit leadership and identify these Soldiers as this is a risk factor.

11. **Grief/Loss** – For example, the recent death of a sibling or close friend.

12. **Substance Abuse** – To include alcohol, prescription meds, drugs, inhalants, etc.

Recommend chaplains actively network within their units to discover which USAR Soldiers are experiencing the above Red Flags. Most all Soldiers who have committed suicide displayed 2 or more of the red flags above, and many were struggling with 3-5 of the above issues at the time of their death, which clearly overwhelmed them.

Bottom line: Don't just ask, "Are you thinking of killing yourself?" Ask, are you struggling with any of the above issues and, once identified, assist them in getting help. There are many helping resources for USAR Soldiers, not least of which is Fort Family and your Command's Suicide Prevention Program Manager. See separate sheet for a list of resources.

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