



CG Column August/September 2010

. "In Fiscal Year (FY) 2009 we had 160 active duty suicide deaths, with 239 across the total Army (including Reserve Component). Additionally, there were 146 active duty deaths related to high risk behavior including 74 drug overdoses. This is tragic! Perhaps even more worrying is the fact we had 1,713 known attempted suicides in the same period. The difference between these suicide attempts and another Soldier death often was measured only by the timeliness of life-saving leader/buddy and medical interventions. Some form of high risk behavior (self-harm, illicit drug use, binge drinking, criminal activity, etc.) was a factor in most of these deaths." – **Army Health Promotion, Risk Reduction, Suicide Prevention Report 2010.**

Across the Army, 385 Soldiers lost their lives needlessly in FY 2009, and another 1,713 are known to have attempted suicide in the same period. The Army Health Promotion, Risk Reduction, Suicide Prevention Report 2010 calls this tragic, I'll go a step further and call it senseless. As an Army leader, what I find most upsetting about the report's assessment is that more young men and women die by their own actions than die in combat.

Knowing how hard we work and train to keep our Soldiers as safe as possible on the battlefield, it's more than a little disheartening to find we're losing more lives to high risk behavior and suicide than we're losing to hostile enemy action.

When you join the Army, you join a "band of brothers" for a lifetime. Being a Soldier means enjoying a sense of camaraderie and shared experiences that form unbreakable bonds – deployments, training exercises, PCS moves, births, deaths, weddings, and watching over each other when times are rough.

Now is the time to step up. We continue to have increasing numbers of our comrades take their own lives. There are actions we need to take as leaders. As a first step, leaders need to read the Army Health Promotion, Risk Reduction, Suicide Prevention Report (2010).

The Army produced a suicide prevention video, "Shoulder-to-Shoulder" to help spread the message that "it's a sign of strength and courage when you seek help when feeling distressed or intervene with those at risk." It's also important to understand that the term "shoulder-to-shoulder" comes from the Civil War when formations of Soldiers would stand shoulder to shoulder as they combat marched through withering fire. Touching sleeves was the way a Soldier knew he was not alone and that his flank was not uncovered.

We need to stand shoulder-to-shoulder now in solidarity with fellow Soldiers to help stem this unacceptable trend of suicides.

At the recent USASMDC/ARSTRAT Town Hall, I talked about two ways we can actively help to positively impact the situation: use the "battle-buddy" system and use the Ask-Care-Escort (ACE) card. Both of these methods can be extremely useful if used properly.

First, battle –buddies. We spend more time with our fellow Soldiers than we do with our families. We probably know them as well if not better than our own families, and in many cases they are the only family we have. There is probably no one more qualified than battle-buddies to detect when something is "just not right." We probably know the difference between when they are just under the weather and when they are experiencing something more onerous. Take the time to ask. Take the time to act.

This brings us to the second point – ACE. Ask your buddy; Care for your Buddy; Escort your buddy. The Army has cards printed with A.C.E, I carry one in my wallet to remind me of the importance of intervening:

Ask your buddy

- have the courage to ask the question, but stay calm
- ask the question directly, e.g., "Are you thinking of killing yourself?"

Care for your buddy

- remove any means that could be used for self-injury
- calmly control the situation; do not use force
- actively listen to produce relief

Escort your buddy

- never leave your buddy alone
- escort to the chain of command, a Chaplain, a behavioral health professional, or primary care provider

Carrying the ACE card is useful, but only if we use it as it is intended – be proactive, ask the hard questions, and watch out for your battle-buddy. The increasing number of suicides will not change unless we each get involved. We cannot afford to hope that someone else will fix the problem, only we can fix the problem.