

Inmate Self-Harm Behaviors for Correctional Officers

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For all practical purposes the biggest difference between prisoners and correctional officers is the fact that prisoners are incarcerated subordinates to the correctional officer's directions and orders while under the supervision of the Corrections Department.

In layman terms, the officer has to constantly struggle and be cognitive of the prisoner's behaviors including the fact they may possess a learning disability or mental illness that may impede their ability to communicate effectively. This makes perceptions biased as the officer attempts to help the prisoner with his problems but are often challenged to correctly understand their message as it is either emotionally or mentally impaired.

There appears to be a discussion ongoing whether the officer has the willingness to help and doing the right thing when he or she does offer the prisoner assistance with their problem especially to those related to self harm or suicides. The officer has to determine rather quickly if the gesture is genuine or whether the problem is manipulated and a petty opportunity to get some attention from the officer.

This is a very important key to communicating and helping with the problem of self-harm and suicides as each method has motivating factors that determine serious or non-serious actions to be taken and relayed to mental health and supervisors.

Most officers do not possess the ability to determine serious from non-serious thus the risks are high that a sign or awareness level may have been missed and create a situation for the prisoner to actually harm himself severely or commit suicide within short periods of time. Ignoring a response based on a wrong evaluation or assessment can lead to creating a tenser situation from the start.

A lack of response by the officer that ignores or minimizes the prisoner's behavior is likely to be demonstrated in an animated and aggressive like manner and brings to the confrontation anger, disgust, and frustration by the prisoner as well as a feeling of ridicule by the officer that believes the prisoner tried to play headgames and results in a provocation of anger by the officer towards the prisoner escalating the situation severely.

Therefore, it is important that the officer takes the time and reads and assesses the prisoner's behavior appropriately and accurately to avoid a critical incident from developing and prevent or intervene in a severe psychological episode by the prisoner and taking the appropriate steps to secure his safety and wellness immediately for the sake of preserving human life.

The officer must be properly trained how to read the motivating conditions, environmental factors or circumstances that triggered the prisoner's request for interaction or attention so that the proper care can be provided by mental health

providers available to treat and stabilize such individuals. In theory, the better the relationship is between officer and prisoner, the better the communication is and the better they understand each other at the time.

This is where the ability to empathize and observe and listen for clues of behaviors is important. Empathy is not sympathy. It is merely the ability to understand another person's feelings or needs through comprehension of behaviors, feelings and words spoken. Sometimes it takes someone to put themselves in the other person's place and try to see and hear what they are seeing or hearing to understand the message spoken.

Certainly the officer must understand the reason for anger if the prisoner's actions or behaviors are ignored or minimized as it draws anger and the feeling that they are alone.

It is important that officers don't stereotype prisoners and believe that they are all the same and that they might react the same way under most circumstances.

Officers must take into account if the prisoner was:

- Unable to cope effectively
- Depressed
- Under the influence of drugs
- Stressed because of changes in environment
- Family turmoil or problems
- Frustrated by recent disciplinary or negative prison factors
- Being bullied by others
- Recent loss of loved one
- Impulsive in nature

Once the officer has taken these factors into consideration then another evaluation must be made related to the threat made or actions pending such as cutting or hanging himself and decide if this act is:

- A cry for help
- Hoping to gain attention
- Overwhelmed by emotions
- Taking control of the situation
- Avoiding others perceived to be a threat or risk to him
- An act to get a high
- Actual act intended to commit suicide

The fact remains that the officer can't be certain which reason or motive is correct and must treat the situation with care and determine how to ensure the prisoner's safety as he makes his notifications and arranges for mental health care providers to see the prisoner as soon as possible and play out this critical incident in a manner that does not empower the prisoner to manipulate others but rather focus on the

reality that he is asking for help and needs to talk to someone who specially trained and skilled to obtain an accurate assessment of his needs.

Every agency should take into consideration the need for specialized training in self harm signs and suicide awareness. They should be considerate of those factors that are created by the environment could and can cause additional personal distress and vulnerability that creates harmful behaviors to appear as well as suicide ideations.

Agency staff should realize that reducing the prisoner's distress level can help reduce self harm and suicides effectively and need to upgrade their training for staff so they can work with these special management prisoners effectively and safely.

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