



Department of the Air Force RESILIENCE

SUPPORTING BOTH OUR AIR AND SPACE FORCES AND FAMILIES



Prevention - #10

Personal/Family

LEGAL PROBLEMS/INVESTIGATIONS

Airmen under investigation and/or facing legal stressors represent 30% of AF suicide deaths. It is important to be aware that legal investigations and legal processes, such as trials or hearings, are usually time-consuming and stressful for the individual involved. Legal problems include UCMJ and other criminal investigation, non-judicial punishment (NJP), and proceedings for issues such as divorce, allegations of sexual harassment, custody hearings, home foreclosure, or bankruptcy. It can also be stressful to be a witness in the above processes. Individuals who have legal problems may experience a wide range of behavioral and emotional responses to include thoughts of suicide or violence. They may have to miss work due to legal proceedings, and as a result work performance and self-care may be negatively impacted.

Sources of stress include:

- Inability to foresee the outcome of the investigation or process.
- Fear of consequences (e.g., disgrace, imprisonment, fines, shame, potential impact on career and relationships).
- Perceived lack of control over outcome/process.
- Feelings of hopelessness about the outcome or the future.
- Feeling that they let down or disappointed their leadership, unit, friends, and family.
- Feelings of abandonment by the unit and friends.
- Feelings that they are a burden to others.

Signs Wingmen Should Know/Look For

- Any talk or social media posts that suggests thoughts of harming themselves or others (“I don’t deserve to live”; “If I can’t have him, then no one can”).
- Any comments suggesting inability to handle possible outcomes (“I can’t handle getting kicked out”).
- Any comments that suggest they feel hopeless about their future (“No matter what happens, I’m done”).
- Self-critical comments (“I can never be forgiven”; “I fail at everything”).
- Self-destructive behaviors, such as increased alcohol use, reckless behaviors, poor sleep, poor diet, lack of exercise, or lack of engaging with their social support.
- Any emotional changes, such as mood swings, irritability, or angry outbursts.
- Checking or writing their will, SGLI amounts, survivors’ benefits, giving away items, or “putting things in order.”

Recommended Wingman Action

- Communicate with and support the Airman’s spouse/family.
- Recognize that legal problems place personnel at greater risk for suicide, and make an extra effort to be a good wingman to these individuals and their family members.
- Reiterate in words and actions that there is hope, there is help, and the Airman is valued by unit leadership both personally and professionally.
- Encourage help-seeking and help connect the Airman and/or family members to the installation helping agencies or military-wide helping agencies (such as Military OneSource) as well as national helping agencies and crisis lines (National Crisis Helpline 1-800-273-8255).

- Take seriously any talk or indications that the individual might be considering thoughts of harming themselves or others.
- Ask them directly if they are having thoughts of killing themselves or someone else or thoughts that they would be better off dead.
- If worried about imminent danger, call law enforcement immediately and do not leave the person alone (not even to go to the bathroom).
- Communicate any concerns to leadership as soon as possible.

Leadership Considerations

- Be aware of the services offered by the Office of the Area Defense Counsel (ADC). When an airman has been notified that he or she is under investigation, the commander must refer the airman to the ADC within 48 hours.
- Consult with the Mental Health Clinic (MHC) as appropriate. Be familiar with the Limited Privilege Suicide Prevention (LPSP) Program, which is a program specifically designed to encourage those under investigation to seek mental health treatment..
- Be familiar with the Investigative Interview Warm Handoff policy and use it as appropriate.
- Once the appropriate investigative office allows you to, inform the individual they are under investigation or are receiving a punishment early in the day/week to allow leadership to provide support and ongoing monitoring, as well as referral to supportive base agencies. Providing such information immediately before a weekend could result in an inability to monitor the individual's status for several days.
- Communicate with and support the Airman's spouse/family.
- Ensure guilt is not assumed or communicated to the Airman before the gathering of facts and legal/administrative processes are given their due. Throughout the entire process, and no matter what your personal feelings may be regarding the Airman's alleged behaviors, the well-being of the Airman and his/her family members are your responsibility. Communicate respect for their well-being in words and actions.
- If a member is incarcerated, remain in contact and relay any concerns you may have to the confinement facility officials regarding risk for self-harm.
- When members are pending trial, it is important that leaders monitor distress and risk for suicide. Collaboration with MHC is strongly recommended.
- Be aware of any impact legal problems are having on the individual's family, immediate work unit, and supervisor, and mobilize support as appropriate.
- When the period of incarceration or the time period of the punishment (Article 15, extra duty, etc.) is ending, actively create a transition/recovery plan with the Airman. Include safety considerations, such as who will be supporting and monitoring the Airman and what helping agencies will be involved.