

Suicide Prevention in Correctional Facilities:

What to Watch For

While it's not a correctional officer's job to address inmate mental health, it is unavoidable. Here are risk factors, red flags, and stressors specific to a correctional facility that may indicate an inmate is considering suicide and next steps to take if you think an inmate is at risk.



RISK FACTORS

Characteristics or situations that put someone at an increased risk for suicide:

- Male
- Pre-existing health issues or terminal illness
- History of depression
- Previous attempts
- Going through opioid withdrawal
- No family or relationships
- History of same-sex rape
- Significant loss in their life
- Long sentence
- Severe guilt or shame
- They say they're considering suicide



RED FLAGS

Behaviors that indicate someone may be at risk for suicide:

- Making statements or threats to harm/kill themselves
- Talking, writing, or drawing about wanting to die
- Looking to secure a means to complete suicide
- Dramatic mood changes
- Inability to sleep or sleeping all the time
- Uncontrolled anger or aggression
- Withdrawing from family, friends, or activities
- Giving away personal possessions
- Engaging in behavior to get put into isolation or segregated housing



STRESSORS

Feelings or situations that could heighten an individual's likelihood of suicide:

- Fear for personal safety
- Problems with other detainees/inmates or staff
- Callous treatment by correctional staff
- Guilt or shame over incarceration
- Loss of family/friends
- Loss of personal choice



WHAT TO DO

Follow procedure. Read your facility's policies and procedures around mental health and proceed accordingly.

Talk about it. Ask an inmate if they're going to be okay or safe with what they're going through. Talking about suicide does not make someone more likely to follow through with suicidal thoughts.

Learn about mental health referrals. If you suspect an inmate may be considering suicide, find out how to document a referral for professional mental health. When in doubt, refer for professional mental health services.

Talk to your chain of command. Learn about policies and procedures and how mental health referrals have been historically handled.