

NCOS AND THE WAR ON

SUICIDE

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Throughout the history of the U.S. Army, there has been one constant: When a mission needs to get done, officers plan it and NCOs execute. Thanks to the hard work of those NCOs and the Soldiers they lead, the mission is accomplished.

As an NCO, it saddens me to say that we are failing to follow this simple formula when it comes to the current rate of suicide in the Army. Currently, the Army's suicide rate is at a staggering level — in the past two decades, we have lost the equivalent of two battalions of Soldiers to suicide. This trend is unacceptable, and as the Army fights the war against suicide, it is up to the NCO Corps, as the backbone of the Army, to execute and win this fight.

The Creed of the Noncommissioned Officer is at the very core of the NCO Corps. This is the blueprint for success for all NCOs. The first sentence in the second paragraph is vital in our battle against suicide: "My two basic responsibilities will always be uppermost in my mind; the accomplishment of my mission and the welfare of my Soldiers."

How can we accomplish any mission if we do not look after the welfare of our Soldiers? Both must be viewed simultaneously; without Soldiers, we cannot accomplish any mission.

NCOs are taught to live by the NCO Creed, as it is the cornerstone of our profession. It provides the guidance a non-commissioned officer needs to accomplish the mission of leading, training and taking care of Soldiers. It spells out the ways in

which NCOs can properly do so. It does this by giving NCOs tools in how to act as well as how to honor their profession.

There is a perceived stigma for Soldiers seeking mental health care in the Army. While this stigma has diminished, it is still more intense than it should be. At the Department of the Army-level of leadership, they recognize the magnitude of this issue. They have implemented many different strategies and programs to help address the misperceptions that often prevent individuals from seeking assistance.

One simple act was renaming "mental health" to "behavioral health." Such a semantic change was an effective way to help reduce the stigma for those individuals seeking help. Posters, videos and public service announcements have been produced to help spread this message and ensure its delivery to the troops.

Nonetheless, the campaign to reduce the stigma of behavioral health has not had the success in the lower ranks it has had in the higher levels of the Army. Soldiers in line units are still masking behavioral health problems, where in the higher echelons of Army leadership, they are speaking out against the stigma.

"One of our challenges is to lower the stigma of [Soldiers] getting follow-on counseling," Lt. Gen. Eric Schoomaker said during a media roundtable in 2009. "We are working in every venue we can to do that. The Army leadership, recognizing that stigma is a major part of that, has undertaken in the last two years very aggressive top-to-bottom sensitization and education of the force."

The stigma surrounding behavioral health and its effect on the numbers of

Soldiers committing suicide is an NCO problem. It is at the NCO-level of leadership that both problems — of stigma and suicide — reside. It is at this level where the battle must be fought and won.

It is at the NCO-level of leadership where attitudes toward behavioral health care are fostered. If the NCOs in Soldiers' chains of command do not support behavioral health care, then their Soldiers will not seek the help they need.

While the chief of staff of the Army makes the policies Soldiers must uphold and abide by, he is not with the troops on a daily basis. The first-line leader, squad leader and platoon sergeant are with the Soldiers on a daily basis. This is where the policies need to be enforced; policies have no merit if they are not enforced by NCOs. It is an NCO job to enforce and maintain the standards, not to pick and choose what they will support.

As a senior behavioral health NCO, I believe wholeheartedly that reducing the stigma of behavioral health treatment will save lives. I am the tip of the spear in this "War on Suicide." We as NCOs must address this issue and fix the problem of Soldiers not seeking behavioral health care.

The NCO Creed is the blueprint to solving this problem. If the NCO Corps truly follows the words of the creed, it will help eliminate this problem.

So how do NCOs begin to fix it? The first step is dispelling the belief among our Soldiers and, more importantly, ourselves that those who seek behavioral health care are weak. Instead, NCOs need to foster the idea that Soldiers who seek help are actually strong, insightful and courageous for recognizing they may need help.

NCOs need to set the example for their Soldiers by showing they care and will not judge anyone for seeking help and utilizing the tools available to them. When NCOs are having an issue, they too need to seek help. If a leader will not seek help, the Soldier won't either.

For instance, if an NCO were to fall during a run, would the NCO not seek help for physical health? Then why, if NCOs were having emotional distress, would they not seek assistance from behavioral health?

NCOs should want their Soldiers to talk to them about anything and everything. In remaining open and open-minded, NCOs can catch problems before they get so far out of hand that tragedy happens. NCOs can do this by counseling their Soldiers monthly, and by getting to know their Soldiers.

This is accomplished through "pine-tree counseling." Pine-tree counseling is the daily counseling that leaders have with their Soldiers on day-to-day life issues. The Army always represents itself as a family, and families take care of one another regardless of the issue or situation. NCOs must know their Soldiers and be involved with their lives.

NCOs should feel that taking care of their Soldiers is an honor, not a job. This is a belief that must be fostered to win the war on suicide. It would be nice if Soldiers had issues that only occurred between 0900 and 1700. But as NCOs, we know this is not the case.

Teamwork, too, is a concept that has carried the Army throughout its existence. Through teamwork, NCOs can solve any problem. This is where NCOs get their strength — not from what rank they wear, but from the teamwork they inspire. Contrary to popular belief, no NCO has

ever been promoted on his or her accomplishments alone. They were promoted based on their Soldiers, hard work and the NCO's ability to foster teamwork.

Soldiers in the Army base their beliefs and values on the Army Values, the bedrock on which the Army functions. If NCOs look at these values in terms of Soldiers seeking behavioral health care, it will help eliminate the stigma of behavioral health care.

However, as a whole, the NCO Corps is terrible at dealing with the issue of suicide and behavioral health. Soldiers treat suicide prevention as a check-the-block type of task. In my last ten years of service, witnessing this from the front lines, it is very obvious. Too many times I have asked a unit with which I was conducting a suicide prevention briefing, "Why are we having this briefing?" The most

common and most frequent answer is, "Because the Army says so," or "Because it's a yearly requirement."

When mission planning, NCOs are fully active in the process. NCOs do not miss details; they thrive on them. By treating suicide as an enemy, we can defeat it. NCOs are the tip of the spear in any mission the Army has ever done. In the area of suicide, NCOs are still the tip of the spear.

I believe the sergeant or staff sergeant is the most important NCO in taking care of Soldiers and their welfare. It is the first-line supervisor who is with the Soldier every day. It is the job of that first-line supervisor to teach Soldiers that it is OK for them to seek help. It is their job to recognize when their Soldiers need help. It is their job to be involved in their everyday life.

The war on suicide is a war that can be won. However, it can only be won if the NCOs in today's Army stand together and fight this enemy. Instead of just memorizing the Army Values and NCO Creed for a board, live the Army values and live by the NCO Creed.

As anything in the Army, there are tools or weapons for whatever battle the Army faces. The greatest weapon in the arsenal of the U.S. Army is the American Soldier. It is a weapon that has to be protected at all costs.

NCOs have the tools and weaponry to accomplish this task. It is up to the noncommissioned officer to do this. It is the calling and duty of every NCO. NCOs need to stand up and say to the world, "I will accept this mission, and I will accomplish this mission."

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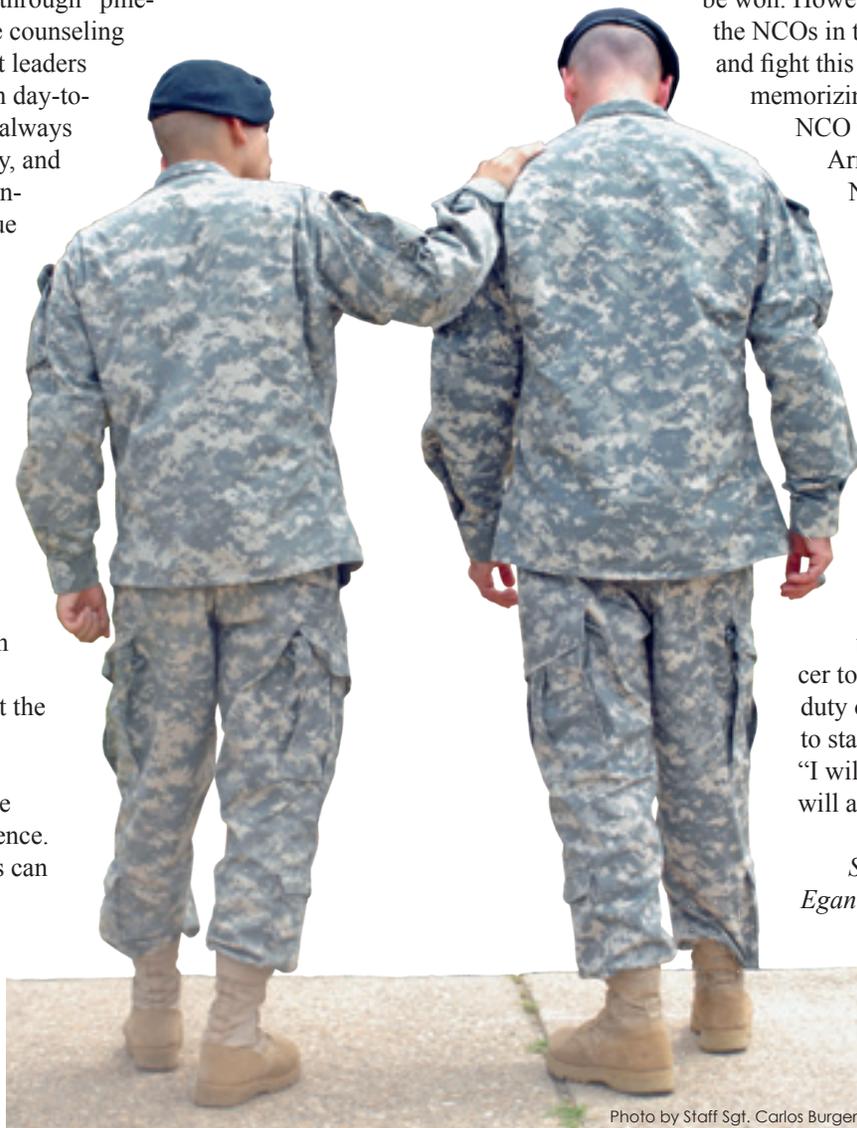


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