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Cover: This issue focuses on the demands and challenges that hostage negotiations place on law enforcement professionals.

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William S. Sessions, Director

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Critical Issues in Suicide Intervention

By
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and ANNE GRUYS

One of the most pressing considerations in dealing with a barricaded subject, whether with hostages or alone, is the possibility that the subject might commit suicide. Unfortunately, many incidents conclude with the individual committing suicide, even when a successful resolution seems near.

In many jurisdictions, law enforcement agencies call upon their hostage negotiation units to resolve incidents involving a barricaded subject who threatens suicide. As part of the negotiation process, negotiators must estimate the likelihood of the subject to commit suicide.

In order to analyze effectively an individual's potential for suicide, negotiators should keep several critical issues in mind. These issues include the subject's propensity toward hostility, recent events in the individual's life, whether the individual has a social support network, and the individual's dependency on alcohol. Other issues include depression, the intended method of suicide, the fact the individual considers suicide a viable option, and the subject's feelings of hopelessness. This article discusses these issues as they relate to

critical incidents involving suicide intervention.

Hostility

While unexpressed anger toward others, such as a loved one or an organization, sometimes motivates suicidal persons, they

often redirect this anger inward. However, such verbal cues on the part of the subjects as, "She'll see" or "They'll know now how they made me feel" may help negotiators direct further dialogue. Hopefully, by encouraging such discussion, negotiators can help





Dr. Divasto



Special Agent Lanceley

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potential suicide victims to vent hostile emotions and reduce suicidal impulses.

Negotiators should also consider the subject's hostility when reviewing safety precautions for responding officers. This is especially important when dealing with suicidal individuals who possess weapons. In such cases, negotiators should avoid face-to-face negotiations, or if unavoidable, treat them with extreme caution.

If a subject does possess a loaded firearm, negotiators should try to convince the subject to unload it and put it in another room. And, if the weapon disassembles easily, negotiators should encourage the individual to take it apart and put the pieces in separate rooms. Anything a negotiator can do to discourage an impulsive act could save a life.

If the subject has a bomb, or claims to have a bomb, negotiators should gather as much intelligence

as possible. Unlike other weapons, such as firearms, a bomb may prove even more dangerous if the subject attempts to disassemble it. Any explosive dismantling should be performed only by the appropriate personnel.

Events

In addition to hostility, certain events or life experiences often trigger suicidal behavior. The loss of a job, a divorce or separation, a criminal indictment, or even a seemingly minor incident may set the stage for a successful suicide. If questioned, subjects usually talk freely about their problems to the negotiator. However, when subjects seem reticent or deny any recent emotional upheaval, information from friends, relatives, or coworkers may prove invaluable.

Negotiators should introduce any information gained from friends or coworkers in both a concerned

and straightforward manner, such as, "Jack, I was concerned enough about you to speak with your boss." Any attempt at deception may prove counterproductive.

Negotiators may also use the technique of asking open-ended questions to elicit information from subjects. For example, asking "If it weren't for the loss of your job, would anything else be a problem?" often prompts subjects to discuss anything else that may trouble them.

Additionally, negotiators should allow subjects to express themselves. This also assists negotiators to plan better on how to help the subject deal with personal trauma. However, during dialogue, negotiators should remember to avoid exhibiting sympathy or making belittling remarks.

Social Support

Another issue of critical importance involves the subject's social support network. Often, individuals who, either by choice or circumstances, have few friends or family members represent an increased risk of suicide.¹ However, if a friend or family member is present or nearby, the subject may request to have contact with this person. In many cases, friends or family welcome the chance to possibly "talk him out of it," but unfortunately, such confrontations may instigate a suicide attempt. In fact, subjects often use this person as an audience for the suicide.

Some police departments successfully use audio or video recordings of friends or family members to appeal to subjects. These tapes allow negotiators to better control

what the friend or family member says to the subject, and they eliminate the subject's use of the friend or family member as an audience for a suicide.

Alcohol

Negotiators should also prepare themselves to deal with suicidal individuals who have a history of alcoholism. Research indicates a high correlation between suicidal behavior and the presence of alcohol.² In fact, many people exhibit suicidal tendencies only while under the influence of alcohol. In such cases, negotiators should discourage subjects from consuming more alcohol. A message like, "Jack, I want to talk with you, but find it difficult while you're drinking," may be enough to discourage further alcohol consumption.

Depression

Today, depression is the most common psychological problem that adults encounter.³ Most episodes of depression usually have recognizable causes, such as the loss of a loved one, and last just a few weeks or months. In general, talking to friends, family, or clergy helps individuals to overcome depression. For some individuals, even in the absence of a friendly ear, depressed feelings subside with the passage of time.

Of concern to the negotiator, however, is a more serious form of depression that can last 6 months or more and may not have a clear cause. Sleep problems, weight loss, lack of energy, and a decreased interest in work, hobbies, or sexual activity often accompany this type

of depression. Yet, if asked, subjects may willingly discuss their feelings. For negotiators, a thorough discussion of these symptoms may provide an opportunity to express empathy and to build rapport with the subject.

Unfortunately, not all subjects openly discuss their problems. If a subject is vague or noncommunicative, negotiators should try to glean as much information as possible about the subject from friends, relatives, or coworkers.

Suicide Methods

During critical incidents involving a possible suicide, negotiators must remain alert to any indications of the subject's preferred method of suicide. In this regard, negotiators need to determine whether the subject possesses such

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items as explosive devices, medications, firearms, or cutting instruments.

Suicidal persons often have a detailed plan as to how they intend to commit suicide. Subjects may think this plan through for months, and they may not easily deviate from it. However, by determining

the subject's intended method of suicide, negotiators may be able to disrupt the plan and prevent the suicide.

Additionally, many of those who attempt suicide use drugs commonly prescribed to treat major depression. Therefore, negotiators should always have access to the *Physician's Desk Reference* (PDR), an annual publication that lists drugs and their characteristics, uses, dosages, and side effects. If a subject takes prescription drugs, the negotiator should discern what kind, how much, and how long ago the subject ingested the drugs. Negotiators should also encourage subjects to drink liquids, walk, vomit, and/or to stay awake. To help in these critical situations, negotiators should develop a relationship with a pharmacist they can call upon for emergency consultations.

Always Ask About Suicide

Negotiators should always ask subjects, "Are you going to commit suicide?" This question may seem obvious and/or unnecessary, and it may not be an easy question to ask. Yet, negotiators must realize that asking individuals if they intend to commit suicide is not going to put the idea in their heads or cause them to commit suicide. Asking this question only serves to bring the topic of suicide out into the open, where the subject and negotiator can discuss it.

No Hope

As expected, feelings of hopelessness correlate highly with suicide.⁴ Persons who feel overwhelmed by the problems of daily

Focus on Technology

Digital Telephony Keeping Pace with Technology

Criminals often use the Nation's telecommunications system to commit serious and sometimes violent crimes, including illegal drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, and terrorism. One of the most effective tools available to law enforcement to investigate these crimes is the court-authorized interception of telephone conversations.

In 1968, Congress carefully considered and passed the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act, after weighing the Government's need to address serious criminal conduct against individual rights to privacy. This act established precise procedures by which law enforcement can obtain judicial authorization to conduct electronic surveillance. Subsequently, the technique became an indispensable law enforcement tool.

Technology

Through innovation and technological improvements, the telecommunications industry greatly enhanced its capabilities during the past 50 years. However, throughout this time of advancement, the basic analog delivery format used by the industry has remained virtually unchanged...until now.

Analog technology—the foundation of this Nation's telecommunications industry for half a century—is rapidly being replaced

life present a real challenge to negotiators. Interestingly, persons who face genuinely hopeless situations, such as a terminal illness, are less prone to take their own lives than one would think. More often, it is the person experiencing the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," as represented by the problems of daily life, who interpret these stressors to be overwhelming. In these cases, negotiators should offer helpful suggestions, where appropriate, and try to point out possible solutions to problems the subjects view as hopeless. However, negotiators should refrain from offering guaranteed solutions, because often these solutions have the potential to fail.

During these discussions, negotiators should also try to help individuals face reality. While discussing such topics as the possible impact of the subjects' suicides on their children may appear to make the subjects feel guilty, it could, instead, encourage them to reconsider.

Conclusion

During incidents involving potentially suicidal subjects, negotiators must deal with several issues simultaneously. Negotiators also face the possibility that despite their best efforts, subjects may still commit suicide. And, while no substitute for skill or experience exists, discussing the critical issues mentioned in this article may prove valuable to negotiators when dealing with suicidal persons. ♦

Endnotes

¹ A. Roy, *Suicide* (Baltimore, Maryland: Williams and Williams, 1986), 7, 119.

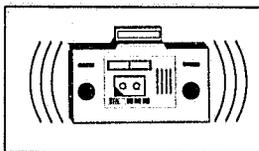
² R. Frances, J. Franklin, and D. Flavin, "Suicide and Alcoholism," *American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*, 13 (3) 327-328.

³ L. Kolb and K. Brodie, *Modern Clinical Psychiatry* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: W.B. Saunders Company, 1982); P.D. Spear, S.D. Penrod, T.B. Baker, *Psychology Perspectives on Behavior* (New York, New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1988).

⁴ G. Evans, N. Farberow, *The Encyclopedia of Suicide* (New York, New York: Facts on File, 1988), 153-154; D. Reynolds, N. Farberow, *Suicide: Inside and Out* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1976), 7-8; supra note 1.

Bulletin Alert

Dangerous Interference



During an undercover drug buy inside a dealer's trailer, a special agent with the Maine Bureau of Intergovernmental Drug Enforcement heard—through the dealer's boom box-type radio—a transmission between backup officers, who were located about 75 yards from the trailer. (The radio frequency was in the 150.000 to 160.000 range.) Fortunately, the suspect did not notice the interference, and the agent completed the undercover deal. ♦