



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 that the Base Legal Office and Area Defense Counsel have to offer.
- Consult with the Mental Health Clinic (MHC) as appropriate. Be familiar with the Limited Privilege Suicide Prevention (LPSP) Program, which allows for specific uses of privileged communication with MHC.
- 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.