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The Reality of Suicide

At some point we as people, not inmates or officers, have to take a serious look at the reality that depression causes on a human being, and to start being truly concerned about a person's mental welfare.

The Bible says that anxiety in the heart causes depression, and that hope deferred makes the heart sick, but the desire brings a tree of life. Lost hope and anxiety causes any person to go into depression, but there is a cure for it... restored hope.

For some reason, this has been lost in the prisons, and what is also interesting is that this is not just for inmates, but for officers as well. Too often we think of suicide only for inmates; the ones that lost everything, and condemned by society. It just seems to make sense that some "criminal" that got life would commit suicide; after all, what does he have left to live for? It's for certain that the prison gives him nothing to live for, as the very term "Correctional Facility" is nothing more than a farce, seeing that there is close to no true correction.

Yet the reality of suicide extends further than just the inmates, as staff also are affected with depression and anxiety. This is most real here at USP Tucson, as in the year and a half I have been here, there has been, to my knowledge,

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three suicides... two of them by staff, one by an inmate.

The prison has some memos posted about what to look for as far as signs for a person who is depressed, or suicidal... yet one has to wonder if the prison takes its own advice.

At some point, we have to get past the foolishness of administration thinking that they are "better" than inmates, and see that we are all human, and each of us struggle with different things, some greater than others. Until this happens, it is feared that the prison will not take suicide of inmates seriously, and will just sweep the issue under the rug. However, when one of their own takes their own life, there is much mourning by the staff, while inmates wonder why there wasn't much mourning for one of our own.

In the balance lies the lives of those who are in the "red zone" of depression, those who are here, in care levels because they may be suicidal. One has to wonder, does the prison really care about these inmates, and if so, what are they doing to help these people except prescribe medication? Pills don't solve problems, interaction by others who care does.

The Bible says that when desire comes, and when there is hope, then depression and anxiety can be defeated. The prescription, therefore, isn't in a bottle or a pill, although it can be helpful. There has to be a restoration of hope to an

inmate, or officer. There has to be an establishment that no matter how bad things are, it can... and WILL, get better.

The problem with this, as far as prisons are concerned, is that staff does not believe this for inmates. Their job is simply to house inmates, not to care about them. There is rarely a true compassion for the inmate, only a continual condemnation for every inmate. As one Unit Manager said to me "this is an evil place", talking about the inmates... of which I take STRONG offense. Wearing a shirt and tie in prison doesn't make you better than an inmate wearing khakis, and the moment you judge, you make yourself lesser than those you judge. It also destroys any chance of compassion, because to care, you first have to cast away condemnation, something many officers fail to do.

But this extends to inmates as well. Months ago, an inmate committed suicide, and many of the comments I heard about this inmate was not positive. Some even said they were glad he was dead, which troubled me greatly. How can we be so devoid of compassion that we could hate a person who took his life?

So both sides, inmates and staff, have much to learn concerning suicide, the problem is that we don't want to deal with it until it happens... but of course, by then it's too late.

My concern lies with one who is currently here, one

who is a Care Level 3, because he is on suicide watch, I have had the chance to befriend him, and in talking with him, I understand why he is in depression. Most of what was told of him offered no hope that his life could get better, and his life up until this point was indeed difficult. But as the Bible says, when the desire comes, it is a tree of life. When a person starts to believe that maybe there is a chance for life to get better, that there IS hope, then the depression starts to weaken... the person then has something to believe in.

Take away the right for an inmate to believe, tell that inmate that "he's just an inmate" as a Unit Manager once said, and you directly put that person in the realm of depression. How many times have staff stepped on the hopes and dreams of inmates by telling them that they can't do anything, they can't go home, they can't do this or that? Unit Manager, Case Managers and Councillors have minimal contact with inmates, often being called "ninjas" by inmates because of their great ability to not be seen. Yet they judge inmates by what is on a computer screen, or a piece of paper, rather than getting to know the person, or giving them a little benefit of doubt.

How do you save a life before it is lost? This is the question that opposes suicide. What is the prison REALLY doing to prevent it? What can inmates do to offset the idea of a person who might be with us today, and dead the next morning?

It all starts with compassion; somebody simply has to care about people. Does staff really care about inmates, or just here to collect a paycheck? If the latter, they are just as much the problem as the inmate who slashes his wrists, or hangs himself on a noose. If the former, then there has to be a genuine attempt to say to the prison, "we care about you, please don't take your life".

But inmates must play their part as well, even moreso, because we spend our time with each other. Granted, officers are just as responsible, especially since we know that officers have taken their lives too, but as inmates, we are still responsible to one another. Every death affects us because that person, liked or disliked, was still part of the whole.

In dealing with one inmate in Care Level 3, he was open with me about his suicidal thoughts. But because we had developed a friendship, I felt it necessary to keep him positive, to have him believe that all things are possible. He's living in a pretty tough situation, with almost no hope, but I told him there is always hope.

Some might call it "false hope", telling someone something that may never happen, but I think it's spiritual suicide to discount the power of God. I have seen miracles in my life more than once, and I am convinced that with God, all things are possible. This is what I tried to instill with the inmate, and in that, in this seed of hope, there developed a

new sense of life. There was purpose, where there was none.

Over the weeks of encouragement, he told me that he wasn't thinking of suicide anymore. Why? Because he now has hope, and in fact seen it in action. He had a hearing on restitution, where he was told he may have to pay a million dollars in restitution. He was concerned that he could never pay that amount, but when he went to the hearing it was dropped to only \$25,000. This is still a significant amount, but the very idea that it is FAR lower is proof that things can change.

What cannot be ignored is the power each person has to encourage... or discourage another person. What we say may well be saving a life, or destroying it. How many times do we really spend helping each other, rather than breaking them down, condemning them, or looking at them as less than we are? We are, spiritually speaking, killing them, and we ought not be surprised if, when they take their own life, that we actually had a part in it.

Few people take suicide in prison seriously, and only after the deed is done, and quite unreversable. Sadly, we also frown on those who do it, thinking we are better than those who lose their lives, never truly trying to understand what that person was going through.

What makes this more challenging is that inmates are limited in how they can help one another, especially when

there is a situation where inmates are separated from the help they could get. In my situation the inmate I was helping, who was starting to see some daylight in his hopes, was put into the SHU, or Special Housing Unit, on a charge. Just when things start to look up, things begin to fall apart. The problem now is that the encouragement he was getting has now been cut off, as if the devil himself determined to claim the life for his own. My concern is that now this person may backslide, wondering if it is a fool's quest to believe things could get better, when at any time you could get caught up in a situation and end up in the SHU for months. What will the prison do concerning his mental stability? Likely nothing until the problem reveals itself, and the prison is left to cover its tracks, because it didn't care enough about the inmate to do anything while he was in their care.

Who cares about those in these situations? Do we take a stand against suicide, or wait until it's too late, and then act like we care? The time to care is now, not later, when nothing can be done.