

SUICIDE PREVENTION AWARENESS MONTH

September is Suicide Awareness Prevention Month

Please see the Letter from the Editor in the Sept. 13 edition of The Register for background on this series of stories. These stories are the result of more than a year of prayer and reflection.

This edition of The Register includes stories relating to veteran, farm and youth suicides. The purpose of these stories is not to shock, condone or endorse suicide. Rather, the hope is to bring an open,

candid discussion to the often-stigmatized topic of suicide.

To view the Sept. 13 edition of The Register, please visit: salinadiocese.org/the-register/documents

Struggling Soldiers:

Discussing the effects of service, stigma of seeking mental health assistance

By Karen Bonar
The Register

;IGY6

(Pause; I've got your back).

The tattoo of the phrase is visible on James'* forearm as he talks about the reality of suicide in veterans.

"There's probably not a vet out there that hasn't thought about suicide," he said. "What puts us off is suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem."

James is 48 and lives near Ft. Riley. He retired after 20 years, 1 month and 26 days of service in the Army. During that time, he was deployed five times in the Middle East.

Throughout two decades of military service, James assumed greater responsibility with each deployment. By the time he retired from the Army, he had almost 500 soldiers under his command, had earned a purple heart and three bronze stars.

"I got to know all these guys so personally," he said of those he served with.



James* has ;IGY6 tattooed on his forearm. The tattoo is to raise awareness for those in the military. *Name was changed to protect privacy.

Photo by Karen Bonar / The Register

"They're almost like my kids."

And he was determined to bring every single soldier home from each deployment.

James looks at the ";IGY6" on his arm.

The semicolon means if you're considering committing suicide, pause. IGY means "I got your" and the 6 refers to back. For those in the service, 12 o'clock is in front, and 6 o'clock is behind them, hence ;IGY6 (Pause; I've got your back).

Being able to see what's behind you, see what's coming, is important to those who have served in the military, he said.

"Most combat vets cannot sit in restaurants unless we can see the door," James said. "Most cannot sit in a crowded room unless our back is against a wall."

ACCORDING TO A 2018 report released by the Veterans Affairs (that analyzed data from 2016), an average of 20 veterans a day die by

suicide.

While James has the visible reminder of the tattoo on his body, inevitably, temptation creeps in.

"Sometimes you just have had enough," he said. "You don't feel like you're wanted or people understand or that you're respected. They don't agree with what you did in the military."

One night, this thought path led him to a point where he nearly completed suicide.

"I sat here one night and

"There's probably not a vet out there that hasn't thought about suicide. ... Sometimes you just have had enough. You don't feel like you're wanted or people understand or that you're respected."

James

I had a gun to my head," James said.

His friend, Mark*, called during that pivotal moment, which allowed him to collect his thoughts. While ending his life was a temptation, the pull of the brotherhood of those he served with was stronger.

"I know who my boys are," James said. "I was fixin' to end it, and I didn't because I knew they are here."

FOR MANY, THE fraternity offered by fellow veterans assists them through the difficult times.

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Priests reflect on struggles of mental health, military

By Karen Bonar
The Register

FORT RILEY — On the eastern edge of the Salina Diocese sits Fort Riley, home to approximately 10,000 soldiers.

According to the April 2018 Issue Brief by the Kansas Health Institute, the risk for suicide is 22 percent higher among veterans, compared to the U.S. civilian adult population.

Father Leo Blasi and Father Curtis Kondik have firsthand experience ministering spiritually to soldiers.

Father Leo Blasi was ordained a priest for the Salina Diocese in 2017. A retired Army veteran, he served in the U.S. Army from 1985 to 2014 — 11 years full-time duty and the remaining 18 in the Army National Guard in both Kansas and Oklahoma.

He flew blackhawk heli-

copters with his National Guard unit in both Bosnia and Iraq.

"A lot of times, being in the National Guard was harder because you get back and go back into civilian jobs. It's necessary to have closure after (being in combat)," said Father Blasi, who is currently the pastor at Sacred Heart Parish in Plainville.

His family has a history of military service. His father, Frank, served in the Army during the Korean War, and he had seven uncles and one aunt who served in both the Army and Navy.

In addition to a personal and family experience of the military, Father Blasi served as an assistant chaplain at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center in Milwaukee, Wis., during his time as a seminarian.

"I saw a lot of Vietnam vets who did not have that experience (of closure)," Father Blasi said. "They felt



Father Leo Blasi

their life had no value and that God could never forgive them (for their actions)."

He spent two years serving the veterans, and his military background and experience were assets during that assignment.

"It was amazing to see how their thoughts changed when we started to talk to them about God," Father Blasi said. "They could find forgiveness if they looked in the right place."

He said finding God in the midst of anguish is

essential to walking through those struggles.

"I think a religious experience helps (bring hope)," Father Blasi said. "The majority of people who are in despair probably don't have a good religious support group."

"I think we're experiencing this more as a culture, because previously as Christian culture, men had support from their local community and church."

The current culture, however, turns inward to self, rather than upward to God, he said.

Returning from a tour of duty can be difficult, and many who return struggle to reintegrate. Father Blasi said he has a loved one who returned from the Middle East with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

"We encouraged him to get the proper help," Father Blasi said. "He got the closure that he needed."

Yet seeking assistance in the mental health realm is

often not what a returning soldier wants to do.

"Going to a psychiatrist is still frowned upon in the military," Father Blasi said. "They've worked hard in the last 10 years to change that, and they've come a long way, but you're seen to be weak or not fit to be a soldier anymore (if you seek mental health services)."

While the military is working to reverse the stigma of mental health assistance, "there's still that perception," Father Blasi said.

"Those who are higher in the chain of command accept the need for mental health assistance, while sometimes lower in the chain of command, there is resistance," he said.

He added it's important to realize there are two types of PTSD.

"The first is from a traumatic brain injury, many from an IED," Father Blasi

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SUICIDE PREVENTION AWARENESS MONTH

Peer support, professional help can be key to recovery

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Peter*, who is 36, served for 15 years in the Army. His service included three deployments to the Middle East.

"You get to a point where it's too much," he said. "Suicide crosses my mind quite a bit, and I'm never going to act on it because I have friends and brothers (from the Army) who have died that way.

"I won't commit suicide because I know the hurt that it leaves behind. I can't do that to others."

Discussing suicide isn't easy.

"It took awhile for me to get to a point where I could talk about it with anybody," Peter said, "because the stigma people see toward it. If you think about it, people see you as weak. That's why a lot of people keep it to themselves."

He and those he served with had several close calls during deployment. Once, his convoy changed order and position due to a broken down vehicle, shifting the normally left-facing gunner to the right.

"During a fire fight, a bullet impacted the dead center of the turret," Peter said. "Had (my friend) been facing that direction, he may have gotten hit in the face."

Following deployment and medical discharge, he struggled with physical and emotional pain. It begins with minor physical pain, which can escalate quickly.

"Sometimes, I can be out with a friend somewhere public, and the pain begins," he said. "The pain takes my focus off of my mind and my thoughts. Then they start to affect me. I get agitated and anxious, so I have to leave."

Peter said he struggled with several years of depression. Slowly, he abandoned activities he once enjoyed, such as fishing.

“A lot of vets feel like they can't get help. They go in thinking, 'This person can't help me, nobody can help me.'”

Mark

"I was in depression for two to three years," he said. He would isolate himself and play Xbox, but it was a mindless activity to pass the time.

"I was in the basement with the lights off," Peter said. "I had bad insomnia. A lot of times I'd go three or four days and not sleeping, then sleep three or four hours.

"My wife was trying to help. She was trying to get me to do everything she could."

Connecting with loved ones upon returning home is a struggle.

"The connection you felt before deployment is nonexistent when you come back to everybody who stayed behind," Peter said. "I could meet up with any of the guys I deployed with, and we could talk about anything and everything. With family and friends, I don't feel that kind of connection with anyone."

As Peter is climbing out of the darkness of his depression, he is easing back into life. While unable to work a traditional job due to his neck and back pain, he is drawing on his previous construction experience to work on small woodworking projects.

"I'm doing wooden flags," he said. "I can do it at my own pace. When my back or neck starts to aggravate, I can go inside and sit down."

"Woodworking is helping. I felt like I was in a deep, dark black hole. Woodworking gave me a sliver of light I could help pull myself out

of. I'm trying to hold onto the little light I've found."

THE MILITARY SERVICE experience — from combat to coming home — is individual.

"Everybody will react differently," James said. "We have different context. That's why the VA has the biggest problem, because we're not all the same."

"We could have seen the same stuff for multiple deployments and been affected completely differently," Peter added.

The brotherhood of military veterans are a lifeline and support. Talking about and through the struggles is essential.

"We all see a counselor," James said. "It's easier to go to a fellow vet and say, 'I'm having a problem.' It's harder to go to a person who hasn't been through what we've been through."

Although he said some counselors through the VA are also veterans, which helps increase credibility and trust with veterans.

"The first time I walked in, I was asking her questions," he said of his therapist. "I want to talk to someone who knows about me. When I felt like she understood me, I opened up."

"When I went in to my PTSD counselor, I went in and there were three bottles of water and a box of tissues. When I left, there was no water and no tissues."

Yet the process to seeking a counselor was a slow one.

"I was retired for three or four years, and every time I went camping with a friend, my friend would prod me," James said. "Sometimes, it takes somebody else to see (the need for therapy). Because it was normal to me. My friend pushed me to get help."

THE VETERANS SAID the military mentality makes it difficult to seek assistance while serving.

"For most vets, if we go to get help, it's a sign of weakness," James said. "That's why most vets don't get help."

Acceptance of mental health services are slowly improving.

"There are so many avenues to go to now," he said. "The biggest thing with VA is there are so many veterans, they can't keep up."

James said the ability for veterans to seek services outside of the VA system has helped open more opportunities.

Peter said his biggest struggle with counseling is finding a good fit.

"I've been through a dozen or so counselors," he said. "If you don't feel a connection, you don't feel like you'll get anything out of it."

MARK, WHO CALLED James on the night he nearly committed suicide, spent 15 years in the military in security and as a sniper.

"I lost count," of how many times he's been deployed, he said. "Seven, eight, nine, 12? I don't know."

"A lot of vets feel like they can't get help," he said. "They go in thinking, 'This person can't help me, nobody can help me.'"

During one of his tours in Iraq, his commander ordered him to go to counseling.

"I was having lots of issues," he said. "It was either go (to counseling) with an open mind — do what they tell you to do it and exactly how they tell you — or go home."

"I was kinda closed minded for awhile, but she helped me face my fears. It was the hardest three months of my life, but I wanted help because I got tired of what was going on."

Another struggle with seeking mental health while on active status is job security.

"Sometimes the minute

VETERANS RESOURCES

Veterans Crisis line:
1-800-273-8255
press 1

Online chat:
VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat

Text line: 838255

you get help for mental health, your career is done," said Mark.

FINDING NOT ONLY counseling assistance, but camaraderie is essential, the men said.

"What helps most of us is the brotherhood — fellow vets," James said. "I'll sit down and talk with fellow vets."

"That bond (of brotherhood) doesn't go away with time," Peter added.

He also acknowledged support groups online have helped.

"I'm in a group there are thousands in the group who are vets and supporters," he said. "Whenever I'm having issues that are really getting to me, if I write a post, there is someone who has gone through something I'm going through. Within a few minutes, there can be several hundred responses."

While Mark said formal counseling has been helpful, it's equally important to have informal outlets and opportunities.

"It can be just sitting in the shop talking," he said.

"My comfort place is in my shop," James added.

Beyond fellow veterans, James said it's helpful when friends and civilians let veterans talk openly about their experiences.

"Even if you don't understand (what they've been through), just talk to them," James said. "Lend an ear. Let them get everything out."

* Names were changed to protect privacy

Military is making efforts to assist with struggles

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said. "The second type of PTSD is from being in a combat environment (witnessing combat-related incidents). It's just as dangerous as the other kind."

He said the military is working hard to help those with physical brain injuries, yet the second type of PTSD is less visible. The soldier looks physically unharmed, yet can suffer severe mental trauma.

"The only way to help people with cultural traumatic stress is being able to welcome them back into the culture," Father Blasi said. "I don't think the military has a good grip on that at this time."

A PRIEST FOR THE CATHOLIC Diocese of Cleveland since 2000, Father

Kondik has been a military chaplain for about eight years. The last two years has been at Fort Riley, near the eastern edge of the Salina Diocese.

He is the Chaplain for the 97th Military Police Battalion and the Senior pastor for the Catholic community at Ft. Riley.

"Suicide prevention is one of the strong efforts throughout all of the branches of the military ... trying to help soldier be resilient and bounce back from difficulties," he said.

"The struggle (with suicide/depression) is a combination of many things. You can't say people who have been deployed or are more frequently deployed are more at risk. Each individual is different. Some suffer from a lack of hope and disconnect from significant relationships. There are several dif-



Father Curtis Kondik

ferent factors that come together to create a highly stressed personal environment."

He has served overseas in two tours — one in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. Currently, he works with the Military Police (MP) at Fort Riley, where more than 10,000 soldiers are stationed.

Addressing struggles, especially mental health, can be tricky. Some soldiers will directly reach out to their chaplain; others will be referred by a superior. Additionally, he said, soldiers look out for one another.

"Soldiers are encouraged to reach out to each other and be aware of signs of stress," Father Kondik said, adding this is often referred to as a "battle buddy." "All the soldiers were trained to be responsible for each other. As soldiers, it's our philosophy to watch out for each other, their well being and have each other's back regardless of rank."