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COMMENTARY: Gunpowder, fate, support – Suicide survivor shares story

U.S. Army Garrison Heidelberg Public Affairs Office

HEIDELBERG, Germany -- The worst taste in the world is the gunpowder residue at the business end of a shotgun. Not so much because of the taste itself, but the reason why you're tasting it.

My now ex-wife and I had filed for divorce two days earlier, and a loaded shotgun in my mouth was the best solution I could devise to express my deep sadness.

Whether sheer clumsiness, divine intervention or an unconscious moment of self-preservation, I lived despite pulling the trigger.

I was blessed -- my little finger received the hammer strike instead of the firing pin -- sparing my life.

That was nine years ago.

Today I'm blessed by a closer relationship with God and a wonderful family.

I'd lie if I said I haven't thought about taking my life since that cold November morning.

Some bad news in the middle of a deployment to Iraq led me down the familiar path of suicidal thoughts. Fortunately I had a great team of Soldiers by my side who knew me well and knew something wasn't right. Between them and the nearest chaplain, I was able to talk through my feelings, my thoughts and my options.

Ultimately, taking your own life should never be an option on the table -- no exceptions.



Unfortunately, 143 Soldiers made the wrong choice in 2008, which works out to a rate of 20.2 suicides per 100,000 Soldiers, and is the highest number since 1980 when the Army began tracking the figure. It's also higher than the national suicide rate - 19.2 per 100,000 people.

In response to a growing rate of suicide, the Army began using the ACE Suicide Intervention Program in 2008.

The acronym ACE stands for:

Ask your buddy -- Have the courage to ask the question, but stay calm, and non-judgmental. Ask the question directly, e.g., "Are you thinking of killing yourself?"

Care for your buddy -- Remove any means of self-injury. Control the situation in a calm way; force would only escalate the situation. And actively listen to your friend's concerns.

Escort -- Never leave your friend alone, and escort him to the chain of command, a chaplain or a health care provider. Get him help.

Well before this program Soldiers across the force were doing just that. I'm proof positive that this method helps save lives. My friends knew me best and started asking questions, made sure I didn't do anything stupid and got me help.

Soldiers have many places to turn if they feel they've run out of options.

In the garrisons, Soldiers can find a chaplain. Family life chaplains are trained counselors who work with Soldiers on a wide range of issues. Go to Army Community Service, where Military and Family Life Consultants can help. Personnel at the local medical center can also get you to a counselor.

When deployed, go to a medic, an aid station or a chaplain.

The best advice I can give to anyone who thinks they have run out of options -- start talking. The more trusted people you talk to the better your chances of getting help and the better your chances for survival.

(The identity of the author of this piece has not been disclosed by request.)

