

“TRIGGER POINT”

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

“An inside look at dealing with Suicidal Barricaded Subjects”

By

James P Fuda
King County Sheriff’s Office (retired)

This article has been reprinted with the permission of the author

Over the past twenty years, the suicide rate in the United States has tripled among people in the age range of 15 to 24. Because of socio-economic pressures in today's upbeat society and the marked increase of drug usage, coupled with the common occurrence of depression among the mentally unstable, the suicide rate is on the rise each year. With the aggravation of the rising crime rate, heavy caseloads, and personnel shortages, the pressure is once again on the street officer to be even more prepared and skilled in the art of **Crisis/Suicide Intervention**.

At this point, I think it's important for one to understand the meaning of Crisis Intervention and the principles that evolve around the Crisis State. All street officers deal with these types of situations to some degree on a daily basis without even realizing the steps they have taken to calm a potentially violent situation. For example, the about-to-turn physical domestic dispute that was separated and calmed.....calmed by words from an everyday "Street Cop" that turned a hazardous situation back into perspective to the combatants. All Crisis Intervention is just that....."the ability to diffuse intense emotions of a person to a normal functioning level". Also, one must be aware of the following basic facts when a person is in crisis:

- 1. Emotions are the controlling factor of the subject; therefore, rational thinking is at a minimum.**
- 2. If the person believes he is in a Crisis State, HE IS!! And**
- 3. Because of the first two factors, normal coping mechanisms are non-existent, causing the person to turn inward and feel isolated; often, and most likely, turning away from his usual support system.**

Returning the person in crisis to a normal functioning level is the job at hand for the police officer.

As with all potentially volatile situations, the patrol officer must approach a **Suicidal Barricaded Subject** with officer safety in mind. One must not forget that a fine line exists between a suicidal and homicidal subject. Just as important, do not fall prey into the situation of "**Suicide-By-Cop**" where the subjects makes an overt act forcing the police officer to use deadly force against him. **Always, remember, once the scene of a lone barricaded subject is contained, the worst that can happen is the subject can kill himself.** As quoted by Dr Harvey Schlossberg, the man responsible for our negotiations techniques still used today, made a comment regarding Suicidal Barricaded Subjects at a recent seminar that I attended in Baltimore....."**Never shoot the subject. If he wants to die, let him do it himself. Never forget that if he is hell-bent on killing himself, he is going to, and nothing you can do or say is going to stop him!**" All aside, it is still the primary responsibility of our job as a police officer to protect and save lives, and that includes the moral obligation to protect the life of the person with the sole intent of harming only himself.

Suicidal subjects, each and every one of them, are using suicide as a means to deal with and/or solve a problem. Whether it is used as a way of coping with family/social pressures or “getting even” with a loved one, the primary reason is to escape from the real or perceived “pain” that is being experienced. **(Remember, even if the pain is not real, if the person believes it to be.....IT IS!!!)**

When a first-line officer arrives at the scene of a **Suicidal Barricaded Subject**, background intelligence is important. However, if the situation deems necessary, start talking at the earliest convenience. And, if you have any doubt as to the person’s intentions, don’t hesitate to ask.....”**ARE YOU GOING TO COMMIT SUICIDE?”** If at all possible, do not try and lie to the subject. If you feel you must, keep it to a minimum. Untruths are not worth the possibility of being discovered, as you will lose trust and credibility causing rapport to be greatly diminished. At this point, you might be asking yourself, “This all sounds good so far, but what the hell am I supposed to actually say?” It is my belief, with suicidal people, that it is not so important **WHAT you as HOW you say it.....within reason, of course**. I feel that if you really listen to what the subject is saying, by allowing him to vent, you will discover your “**HOOK**” that is causing the person’s internal trauma. A “**HOOK**”, as best described, is a topic that strikes an emotional note with the subject.....something that has **value or meaning**. In other words, a “snag in the plan to end it all”; for example, a child that will be left behind or unpaid bills that his family will have the burden to pay on their own. With the venting process in progress and an emotional “**hook**” with which to build rapport between you and the subject, coupled with the compassion and sincerity you will have in your voice, the well-equipped police officer will be well on his way to problem solving.

Problem solving, simply put, is posing realistic options to gain a satisfactory end. When talking to a suicidal subject, present several options as what he can do to better his life and/or situation. At first, that person will have reasons, although usually unjustified, as why those options will not work. He will see **death and an only option**. The police officer **must** then remind the suicidal subject that death is a **FINALITY not an OPTION**. Once rapport has been established, you must attempt to convince the person that he is in crisis, and, because he is so, you, the police officer, are needed to help him make sensible, rational decisions. I always add when talking to such a person that he has nothing to lose by giving my options at least an attempt. My reasoning behind this, and I tell the person so, is that all that could be lost by listening to me is a little bit of time. I tell the individual.....”You can always kill yourself, but first, give this a try; then, if it doesn’t work, you know you’ve done everything you could and you can now die with a clear conscience.” This might sound like something that should **not** be said, something “taboo”, because, in essence, it appears that I have given this person permission to take his life. On the contrary.....this technique has worked for me time and again. It is my belief that the period of time that a person is actually mentally prepared and capable of killing himself...the impulse to die as it were.....is a very short period of time. I call this phenomenon **TRIGGER POINT**. I feel this explains the reason why people kill themselves in their homes, the same homes where family members the subject expresses strong emotional ties to must remain, and do not travel away from the residence to commit suicide. I think if the time was taken to drive to an obscure location where the

individual is at the moment he is capable of killing himself, the suicidal act would not be committed.

Along the same lines, the same holds true for the person bent on self-destruction at someone else's hand. In July this past year, I was called to a small community in a South Seattle suburb to negotiate with a Vietnam veteran who had just murdered his ex-wife and her current boyfriend in front of their six year old son. The man purposely remained in the small community for over two hours before he was seen by the Police and stopped not a mile from the homicide scene. His plan was to force a confrontation with the Police and have the officers kill him. On my arrival to the scene, I was told the murderer was holed up in a pick up truck and surrounded by Police who had taken cover behind their vehicles. I was immediately told by a Sergeant on the scene to "hurry up", as the small town Police Chief who was negotiating with the suspect had just notified the Command Post that he was "losing the suspect and a confrontation was imminent". I was then sent alone to walk the 150 yards to the confrontation site. While walking, I can remember trying to think of how I was going to build some type of rapport with this man. Nothing came to mind at that point, as all I could do was imagine the seriousness of what was taking place. As I crouched behind a Police car, I talked to an Officer who had a shotgun pointed in the direction of a dark green pick up truck 20 yards away....I told him that I was the County negotiator. The rural Officer replied, "I'm glad you're here, but I think we're going to have to kill this one." I asked him to radio the Chief, who was negotiating over a loud speaker a few yards away, and have him introduce me to the suspect. The Chief wanted me with him, so I ducked and crawled over to his car to be briefed on the situation. After talking with the Chief, I knew the prognosis was, at best, not good, when the Chief said, "I think this is going to end in a gun battle". Although not out loud, I said to myself, "What the hell am I doing here? Do you want a witness to the shooting?" On regaining my composure, I remembered my **Trigger Point** theory and realized the suspect would most likely have already forced the situation had he wanted to die. Although a difficult dilemma, I knew that if I just conversed with this person, gave him a graceful surrender, it would end peacefully. After being introduced as the negotiator by the Chief, the suspect stated, "So you're the negotiator.....Well, Mr. Negotiator, it's going to be a great night for a firefight!" I then let the man "vent". He talked about his family and his financial troubles and talked mostly about Vietnam. I then discovered my "**hook**", and blamed Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) for his actions. In other words, he was a nice human being who had been subjected to the horrors of the Vietnam War and PTSD was responsible for his actions. I guaranteed him a VA counselor and two hours later he surrendered without incident. As with my barricaded double homicide suspect, the idea behind critical incident negotiations is to use time as a key factor in reducing the potential for violence. **Conversation with Containment** is essential to achieve this goal. It is the patrol officer's job to keep the person talking....keep the person conversing beyond his **Trigger Point**.

My advice to every officer who must negotiate a suicidal subject is to keep the person talking. You will know you are making progress if he starts talking about the future.....by the future I mean beyond the present situation. Also, the conversation will be of a less threatening nature and the subject will be talking more slowly and in a calmer manner.

Once the mechanics discussed are in motion, with the majority of cases, the situation will resolve itself over time. We would hope that trained negotiators will arrive to assist in the resolution of the incident. If not, the key point to remember in the resolution/surrender phase is to inform the person exactly what to expect when he leaves his location to submit to the Police. If you are requested by the person to be present at this moment, I would suggest against it. Most often, a passage known as transference, or a re-direction of feelings for the subject by the negotiating police officer, takes place. This is an impression by the officer that, because he has conversed with the individual in crisis, this person will not harm him. This is based on the officer's feelings and not the facts at hand. The subject, until he is in custody, is still a threat and should be handled as such. There is still the unlikely possibility the person was hell-bent on killing himself, aside from any negotiation/psychological techniques that were used, and could harm police officers in his attempt. If you must be present at the surrender, be careful and **keep your cover**.

Along these lines, there have been police officers, such as I, who have negotiated with a **Suicidal Barricaded Subject** who did complete the act, despite the unselfish efforts of the officer who attempted to restore some order to the life of a troubled human being. Oftentimes, the death of a citizen under these circumstances, the caliber of victim not being a factor, leaves lasting effects on the negotiator/officer. The officer, blames himself for the death.....believing that if he could have done or said something different, the individual would be alive today. One must always remember, **if a police officer fails to successfully negotiate with a person in crisis, THAT PERSON has the ultimate responsibility for his/her own life.**

As with many procedural guidelines in police work, there are no absolutes. This allows for justified deviation from policy when deemed necessary for a specific incident. The same rule holds true for the **Suicidal Barricaded Subject**. If the scenario dictates alternate measures, weigh the consequences pro and con, and proceed with the best available plan for the situation at hand. When properly dealt with, the successful resolution of these types of incidents reap twofold benefits:

- 1. Personal reward of saving a life for the negotiating officer**
- 2. Reflects highly on the professionalism of both the officer and his Agency.**

Jim Fuda retired as a 33+ year veteran with the King County Sheriff's Office in Seattle. He had been a member of his agency's Hostage Negotiations Team since 1982 and the Team Leader since 1990, and remained in that capacity until his retirement in March of 2006. In that time, Jim had responded to over 250 hostage/barricade incidents and currently is an international instructor in the negotiations field.