

Preventing Trauma and Tragedy

Life is precious, it is also very fragile.

There has been no lower point in parking management than having to experience a suicide incident from a multi-storey car park. It leaves you and your team very low.

The tragedy is, of course, absolutely devastating for the individual and their own family and friends. It also adversely affects the parking staff and emergency services involved in the incident. The ripples of trauma and hurt spread far and wide.

I remember on one of my first days in the role, reviewing a letter from the coroner requesting more anti-climb barriers on the top of one of our multi-storeys following an inquest. At the time funding wasn't available, but I felt determined that over the years I would make every effort to try and improve the situation. Rather than succumb to a fatalistic acceptance, it requires planning and determination to make a difference to reduce such incidents of self-harm in the future. Never, ever, stop raising the issue for finance to fund what you need to mitigate the potential dangers.

Historically, suicide from heights has always been a problem wherever there are accessible high buildings, including places of worship, tower blocks, and bridges and, as we know, multi-storey car parks. According to the Office of National Statistics (2020) suicide has been responsible for over 5,224 fatalities in England and Wales, far more than deaths due to road traffic accidents for example.

Where I live and work there have been three traditional sites for people seeking to jump from. Of these three, two are multi-storeys under my stewardship. The third was a bridge which has subsequently had major engineering additions to prevent potential jump positions.

Action taken to date has included making sure there was funding to put as much anti-climb barriers in place on the top of the multi-storey car parks.

Over the years we have also worked closely with a senior Police negotiator who has provided valuable feedback on our incidents and delivered advice briefings for our parking staff. He did recount having to close the A1 for 6 hours when negotiating someone down from a bridge, which even got a mention in Parliament due to the traffic delays. In the briefing apart from being very complimentary about our staff roles to date during such incidents he gave us an insight into how the situation develops in the first place.

He describes the mind-set that all of us in this life think we are normal thinkers (even when we are not!) and in the event of a severe personal crisis and which wishing to seek oblivion, then the *normal* thing to go is to a suicide venue, such as the top of a multi-storey car park. This explains why individuals would drive hundreds of miles, to say Beach Head, because if you are in a suicidal frame of mind this is where a *normal thinking* person would go. And this also explains why they nearly always head to the top of the multi-storey car park. He also stated that research evidence indicates that this individual may have soon several dry runs, sometimes up to six times, before finally embarking on a fateful decision.

The highly trained negotiator said his role on site is to try and make a rapid connection with the individual, by getting them to respond. If the person speaks this is positive, and if they say they are going to kill themselves, the negotiator responds 'okay, I understand, but not today, come down and we can talk about.' This is the approach taken – gentle but with a clear objective of getting the individual out of immediate harm's way.

The parking staff, as we have been doing, are recommended to politely challenge anyone who appears to be near the outer edge of the car park at the higher levels. Anything which can break the individual's dangerous train of thought can make the difference between life and a serious incident. Continued vigilance on patrol and a weather eye on people movements through the car park can aid early intervention. The clear advice, if the parking staff find someone on a high ledge or on the fence, is to keep a respectful distance and, whilst discreetly scrambling the emergency services, try and make a calm conversation with them. One thing which is never advised is to try and grab the individual when they are in a potential jumping situation. It may precipitate a jump and there are examples of negotiators being pulled over the edge as well.

Over the years, to their absolute credit, parking staff have by gentle persuasion managed to get distressed persons to wait, or come down to a safer position, until the police, and sometimes an ambulance crew can arrive.

On one incident I promptly attended a fatal fall, and although the body had been covered by the Police, blood was still pooling. Unfortunately, it was the first shift for a new female member of staff. She was shaken but has thankfully stayed with us over the years.

Another time, our evening mobile team had arrived at a multi-storey to check our staff member was okay as per their normal round. As the three gathered outside the cabin at the entrance, a member of the public said 'evening' to them as he entered the car park. A couple of minutes later that man fell off the building, narrowly missing all three of the parking team. One of whom was subsequently absent for several months because of this terrifying event.

Over the last few years, have built and operated a 1,000-space car park, which won best new car park at the British Parking awards. During the building design and specification, I raised that I was concerned that the top level allowed too easy access for potential self-harmers to scale the outer fence. I was assured it met building regulations and planning advice. I was unconvinced. When it had been built, but not finished for opening, I engaged the Police experts to attend. They agreed with my views and further anti-climb measures were designed, approved by planners and installed. Fortunately, to date we have not had a fall from height, thus creating a possible 'suicide venue' in people's minds.

We have upgraded our CCTV coverage of all our top decks, these are real-time 24hr staffed at the city centre control, which also has a direct screen link to the Police control. We are also hoping the latest camera technology will provide virtual trip wires, where if someone breaches the camera beam around the edge CCTV are alerted and contact parking staff to investigate. The parking staff and the CCTV staff work in harmony to aid the emergency services who rapidly deploy during these situations. Unfortunately, parking staff who have been on site finding the aftermath of a self-harm incident can be disturbed to varying degrees, we then take steps to provide support as required, assuming the staff member may be affected by PTSD.

Also, over the years, and particular over the build of a new multi-storey, we have liaised and taken advice from the Police (Architectural) Designing Out Crime Officer, who has a wealth of practical advice.

As a last resort, and part of trying to break that damaging line of thought in the at-risk individual, we have placed Samaritan posters at strategic points. To signpost the person to a support service where someone can be listened to.

In today's world where all manner of life stresses can sometimes overwhelm individuals it is important that we as parking people do everything that is practically possible to mitigate the chances of serious or fatal self-harm in our parking facilities.

Another point is the economic damage such incidents can cause. If the ongoing incident is in a busy city centre area, the police will often close nearby streets and roads. This is to protect public directly underneath the self-harmer, to remove public witnesses who may be adversely affected by the incident, and I am sorry to say, to remove persons shouting up encouraging the person to jump. There is also the economic damage to individuals and organisations as staff in parking who may be so affected that they have significant time off, or eventually leave. You can only imagine the significant costs to the rail industry with drivers affected and leaving following self-harm incidents directly in front of them.

Local media need to be encouraged not to splash such events across the various media channels. Highlighting these events only seeks to confirm the 'suicide venue' aspect.

Organisations have a duty of care to ensure premises used by the public are safe to use. I would also argue we have a moral imperative to do the same. What is the way forward? I suggest the following action point summary, which can no doubt be expanded or indeed added to:

- 1) Review all your multi-storey, or car parks at height, that could be used by self-harmers. Identify immediate weak points.
- 2) Liaise with the local Police Architectural Officer and Negotiator team to similarly review the structures.
- 3) Identify a joint list of building requirements e.g., fencing, anti-climb bars, removal of climbing points, signage, installation or expansion of CCTV etc.
- 4) Prioritise the list and seek organisational funding, using a strong and persuasive business case to implement.
- 5) Engage staff with targeted training to clearly state their role and the limits to that role.
- 6) Use Police trainers, or similar, if available.
- 7) Have staff procedures on what to do in a life-threatening incident.
- 8) Use regular drills to practice closing the car park, handing over to emergency services, clearing decks etc.
- 9) Provide post-incident counselling for staff who witness, or are on site, during incidents. Monitor staff ongoing as symptoms of PTSD may emerge, particularly after very disturbing incidents.
- 10) Discuss any learning points with Police following any incidents.
- 11) Engage with the BPA and other peer parking professionals on this issue. The BPA's recent valuable webinar is an excellent example of this.
- 12) Embed anti-suicide prevention into the PARKMARK award for multi-storeys. Covering infrastructure, policy, procedures and training evidence.
- 13) Work with organisations such as Samaritans, in advice, signage, etc.
- 14) Look out for best practice elsewhere. We are all learners here.

Keep yourself and others safe.