

Veteran Suicide Prevention: A Guide for Therapists & Families

Veteran. Suicide.

The first word reminds us of strength, heroism, and courage. The latter reminds us that none are invincible and that there is still much to be done to support them and provide the help that they need. In 2022, there were an average of 17.6 suicides per day among Veterans (2024). While there are more resources than ever before, so many veterans still suffer in silence and succumb to the effects of their service.

Military service can be a complex idea to understand, especially for those not directly involved. Many parts of military service life can affect and exacerbate the experiences that veterans and their families have, and recognizing the warning signs of a veteran struggling with suicidal thoughts is paramount to preventing it.

This guide is for therapists and mental health professionals who want to understand the realities of the veteran suicide crisis and learn how best to support the veterans in their communities. This guide also provides information to veterans and their families on how to help themselves and their loved ones who may be struggling.

The Reality of Veteran Suicide - What the Data Says

According to the latest VA Suicide Data Report suicide was the 12th-leading cause of death for Veterans in 2022 and suicide was the 2nd-leading cause of death for Veterans under age 45 years old (2024). The common question to be answered is why Veterans find suicide a viable option. During a study performed by the Military Suicide Research Consortium, one common answer for the reason a soldier had tried to commit suicide was “a desire to end intense emotional distress”.

Veterans may also struggle with the perceived stigma that can be involved with mental health. There is a societal stigma attached to mental health disorders, and there can be an internal stigma that causes the individual to not seek help and struggle in silence. Military members are trained to be strong and courageous. They can face dangers and situations that many people cannot fathom, and those physical, psychological, and moral injuries leave Veterans forever changed.

Those changes and experiences can lead many to have a difficult time adjusting back to life at home. When they have lived on high alert for a period of time, those instincts for survival are difficult to turn off, sometimes impossible for some. According to the National Center for PTSD, “the most significant predictor of both suicide attempts and preoccupation with suicide is combat-related guilt” (Hudenko, W., PhD, Homaifar, B., PhD, & Wortzel, H., MD (n.d.)). Veterans may experience guilt over their survival when their friends did not make it back home. They may

also experience guilt surrounding missions that had to be a part of. This guilt can make it even more difficult for Veterans to reach out for the help that they need.

Acquiring knowledge of the unique challenges that Veterans face is crucial for providers to understand how to best support Veterans. The types of trauma that can surround military service must be viewed through the lens of combat and military culture. Most importantly, for Veterans, struggling with mental health and thoughts of suicide are not a sign of weakness. Beyond the data, it's important to understand the deeper psychological barriers that keep veterans from seeking help.

Understanding the Psychological Barriers to Seeking Help

Military life is filled with disruption. Veterans are called upon to leave family and the only constant they have is a threat to their lives and their countrymen. While many Veterans deal with that instability successfully, for others, a silent war may continue on the inside. When they reach their threshold, the only option they may see is to end their lives - to end the emotional turmoil.

There is a stigma surrounding receiving mental health care for veterans, and the stigma surrounding mental health issues is often rooted in several cultural and personal factors: military culture and toughness, fear of judgment of perception, and concerns about career impact (Warrior Allegiance (n.d.)). There is an expectation as a veteran to pull yourself up by your bootstraps and handle what's in front of you. That mentality has served many while in combat, but that same thought process can put many Veterans struggling with mental health at a disadvantage when it limits their willingness to seek help.

The culture shift that needs to occur around mental health in the military - is that seeking help is not a weakness. When you're on the ground in a combat zone - sometimes you need air support. You need someone who can take a bird's eye view of the situation and assist where necessary. In that same vein, the mindset needs to shift regarding seeking support for mental health. Calling for support does not equate to failure.

For the providers, friends, and family of Veterans, it can be difficult to understand how to address this belief system. It can seem obvious to where the issue lies and can experience frustration with the Veteran. This is where compassion, empathy, and understanding must come into play. Military culture also enforces a more direct view of communication. Avoiding direct conversations for fear of making things worse can be frustrating to the Veteran. Direct, clear, empathic communication must be extended by those wishing to assist the Veteran. Walking on eggshells or downplaying their experience can decrease the likelihood of a Veteran engaging with those wanting to assist.

For mental health providers wanting to assist Veterans with their mental health, they must understand military culture and be willing to acknowledge their limitations. If a provider is unable to provide specific therapy methods to assist the Veteran, a referral to a more specialized provider may be necessary to give the Veteran the best chance at healing.

Recognizing the Signs - When a Veteran May Be at Risk

There are some signs to consider when assessing whether a Veteran may be at risk of suicide:

Emotional Signs

- Feeling hopeless, trapped, or like there's no way out
- Feeling anxious or agitated
- Feeling like there is no reason to live
- Feeling rage or anger

Behavioral Signs

- Having persistent or worsening trouble sleeping or eating
- Engaging in risky activities without thinking of the consequences
- Increasing alcohol or drug misuse
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Making a plan for how or when to attempt suicide
- Giving away prized possessions
- Putting your affairs in order, tying up loose ends, and/or making out a will
- Seeking access to firearms, pills, or other means of harming yourself

There is a common misconception that talking about suicide will increase the likelihood of it occurring - and that is not true. Speaking openly about suicide with a Veteran can bring what they are feeling out into the light, and can provide relief. Refusing to broach the subject with them can worsen what they are feeling.

Where to Turn - Suicide Prevention Resources for Veterans

There are various suicide prevention resources available to Veterans and their families:

- [Warrior Care Network](#)
- [Veteran Crisis Line](#) (988, then press 1)
- [VA Mental Health Services](#)

Since 2015 the Veterans Administration has made suicide its number one priority and they are continuing to develop and build interventions using the available data. They have expanded the Veterans Crisis Line, increased access to mental health care, and expanded suicide prevention and mental health awareness campaigns.

The Veterans Administration now also offers free suicide prevention training for anyone online and has released the [National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide](#). Many private organizations are working hard to support our veterans and reduce the stigma of mental illness, in order to get our Veterans the help that they need.

The Veterans Advocacy and Benefits Association provides educational resources and real-time assistance for our Veterans to get the help that they need. We are supported by a growing membership dedicated to the health of our Veterans and we are actively working to help as many Veterans as possible.

Conclusion

Veteran suicide is not an individual issue—it's a collective responsibility. Whether you're a therapist, a loved one, or a veteran yourself, recognizing the signs and breaking the silence can save lives. Seeking help is not a weakness—it's a sign of strength. By supporting one another, we can build a future where no veteran feels alone in their battle.

Citations

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