

Suicide risk high among veterans

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Soldiers are trained tough it out, and fear talking about thoughts and feelings may be interpreted as weak.

Suicide is a serious national epidemic. It is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States. However, for America's veterans, it is an even more serious epidemic. Veterans make up 10 percent of the U.S. population, but account for 20 percent of all suicides (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that 18 veterans die by suicide each day.

Neil P. Rigsbee and Aaron James Smith, two graduate students in the University of New Mexico College of Education, Department of Individual, Family and Community Education, and both veterans, co-authored a paper on [suicide risk](#) among veterans.

Suicide is a very real and serious issue among veterans, and yet it's a subject no one wants to talk about, especially in the veteran community," Rigsbee said. "We need to remove the stigma surrounding mental illness and seeking treatment."

Suicide can be prevented. Friends and relatives often feel afraid and are uncertain about what to do, worrying that broaching the subject might trigger an attempt, while others are unsure the seriousness of the situation. But studies have found that asking a veteran about his or her thoughts and feelings does not worsen the situation, it actually helps significantly.

Rates of combat-related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are high among the veteran population, and associated with increased risk of suicidal thoughts or attempts. PTSD is a condition characterized by the re-experiencing of an extremely traumatic event accompanied by symptoms of increased arousal and by avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Concerned with the stigma related to seeking help, afflicted veterans worry that talking about PTSD with doctors, other military members or commanding officers will hurt their career. There is the worry of being seen as weak, and being unable to protect others in the unit.

Rigsbee and Smith researched best practices for assessment of suicide risk and examined the use of logotherapy as a primary and adjunctive treatment for veterans suffering from PTSD and at risk for suicide.

Logotherapy basically means 'therapy through meaning.' The objective is to help people specifically with 'meaning' crises, which manifests either in a feeling of aimlessness or indirectly through addiction or depression.

"Humans can find meaning in spite of situations heavily influenced by factors outside of their control, such as hereditary conditions or inoperable cancer, by governing the attitudes they adopt," Smith said.

"The highly rigid structure of military life negates many personal freedoms, however, veterans can find meaning in the attitudes they adopt in spite of external constraints."

The question becomes, what attitudes are best for [veterans](#) to adopt? Smith said that a veteran who experiences similar situations to those of her peers still perceives them through her own, unique lens. "As such, only she can answer what attitudes best assist her in weathering her current existence," he said. "If her choices to physically alter her situation have been limited, such as not being able to restore a leg lost to an Improvised Explosive Device (IED), she might transcend her biological constraints by recognizing her control over her attitude. Viktor Frankl said it best when he notes that, 'Everything can be taken from a man (or woman) but one thing: the last of human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.'"

Common signs of someone who may be contemplating suicide are prolonged bouts of depression, changes in eating habits and/or sleeping patterns, withdrawal from social activities, neglecting oneself, reckless behavior, feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness, preoccupation with death and getting affairs in order.

More information: Veterans Crisis Line: Vets and family members; 1-800-273-8255; Press 1, chat online, or send a text message to 838255 to receive confidential support 24 hours a day, every day.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline; (800) 273-8255; open 24/7.

Provided by University of New Mexico

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