

Veteran Suicide Prevention

An average of Twenty-two veterans take their own life every day (King, 2015). That is 8,030 veterans lost to suicide every year. Why is this happening? Three reasons that veterans are committing suicide at an alarming rate are a feeling of isolation, the lack of information on available resources, and the stigma attached to receiving help with mental health issues. When veterans are aware of resources available to them, the number of suicides are reduced among them. This essay, will explore the causes of veteran suicide, signs of someone contemplating suicide, why they are not seeking help and resources available for veterans who are having suicidal thoughts.

Veterans and suicide are not a new combination. According to a report released by the U.S. Department of Veteran affairs in July of 2016, 65% of veterans who committed suicide were age 50 and older (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2016). Social media is helping shed light on this issue, one that effects every generation of military personal. The Center for Disease control reported that suicide deaths rose by 24% from 1999-2014, Veterans made up 18% of those deaths (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2016). What is causing some of our most valued Americans to take their own life?

“You come home and you’re back but you’re not back, I don’t think you’re ever really back” says Daniel King in his documentary *Project 22* (King, 2015). For many veterans the full effects of service does not happen until the return home, when they are no longer considered a Solider, Sailor, Airman, or Marine. Daniel goes on to say that, he no longer felt important or like he had a purpose (King, 2015). A common feeling among the participants of the documentary was sadness for the loss of camaraderie (King, 2015). When service members join the military, they become part of a team. When people leave the military, they think they lose that team. They

are no longer a service member, but they are different from their civilian counterparts causing them to start feeling isolated.

A participant in one study said, “I separate myself from society, that part of society. I don't know how to deal with those people ... I just keep myself away.” (Lisa A. Brenner, 2008). When services members come home, they stop feeling a connection with people. One of the basic needs of humans is a need to belong. That feeling of isolation can lead to increased risk of suicide (Lisa A. Brenner, 2008). So why are veterans not seeking help?

One reason that veterans do not seek help is the lack of information on resources made available to them. Multiple participants in the *Project 22* documentary said that transition from the military was harder than war. “They give you a one week class and send you on your way.” (King, 2015). Master Sergeant Dustin Hoffmann, a First Sergeant with the United States Air Force, also said that there is a congressional mandate to offer a one-week class for those service members transitioning out of the military (Hoffmann, 2017). The Transitioning Assistance Program (TAP) is a one-week class that focuses on taking military service experience and translating it to fit a civilian career field. There are other briefings given that deal with other aspects of life after the military such as dealing with Veteran's Affairs (Hoffmann, 2017). The lack of information provided for personality or behavioral transitions add to the difficulty in a veteran's ability to ask for help.

A second reason a veteran has a difficult time asking for help is the stigma associated with mental health issues. “They give you a hand full of pills or stick you in a mental institution on base,” said a veteran during *Project 22* (King, 2015). According to the Attorney General report of 2012, the stigma associated with mental health is not limited to military members it is a national problem. These attitudes can create a lack of hope and undermine a person's ability to

recover (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of the Surgeon General and National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention, 2012). Having mental health issues for a member of the military can be even harder. “It’s hard to live up to the persona of being a hero”, said one veteran (King, 2015).

It is not always obvious that someone is going to commit suicide and sometimes people will give no indication at all (U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs, 2017). There can be some signs that someone might be suicidal, a few of them are withdrawing from friends, family, and society, neglect of personal welfare and physical appearance, having frequent and dramatic mood changes and loss of interest in hobbies, work, school, or other things they used to care about (U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs, 2017). They may also have actions that are out of character such as doing poorly at work or school, acting recklessly or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking, giving away prized possessions, or showing violent behavior such as getting in fights or seeking revenge (U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs, 2017). These are only a few of the signs, for a complete list visit

<http://www.veteranshealthlibrary.org/MentalHealth/Suicide>.

Now that you know some of the reasons behind veteran suicide and signs to watch out for, what can you do to prevent suicide among veterans? If you believe someone is on the brink of suicide, Master Sergeant Hoffmann suggest using the acronym A.C.E., which stands for Ask, Care, and Escort. Ask means to ask the person directly if they are feeling like killing themselves or someone else. Care means show the person compassion and empathy, let them know that you care for them and want to help. Escort means to escort that person to a professional at an emergency room or a mental health facility (Hoffmann, 2017). The Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) says to contact the National Suicide Prevention line at 1-800-273-8255,

www.veteranscrisisline.net, or text 838255 for support for veterans and their caregivers. These resources are available 24 hours a day (U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs, 2017). The veterans in *Project 22* urge their fellow vets in crisis to call someone, anyone and reach out. They want you to know that asking help does not make you any less of a warrior it makes you a victor (King, 2015).

There is a wide range of resources available to veterans; unfortunately, they are not always easily located. The greatest impact in helping veterans at risk is to reach them. Social media when used properly is an effective tool in contacting veterans. Campaigns that focus on a specific group such as veterans in a specific area have proven to be effective. The message needs to be sent through multiple media platforms and repeated often for best results (Langford, 2013, p. 32). Veterans also need to be provided with better information when transitioning home after deployments and transitioning from military life to civilian life. Part of TAP should focus on the health and wellbeing of service members transitioning out. This would require the course to be longer than one week. Mandatory counseling could be an effective way of reaching veterans returning home from deployments. Another effective way to reach veterans is through informal support groups. A place where people can come together to share their stories and feel connection or comradery.

Resources available to veterans vary depending on location. The website Military One Source, <http://www.militaryonesource.mil/>, can put veterans in touch with counselors in person, over the phone, and online. It can also help veterans find other resources available to them in their local area. The National Alliance to End Veteran Suicide, <http://www.na2evs.org/Resources>, also has a list of resources available for veterans.

What other things can veterans do to help in their healing? They should consider going back to school as a way of starting a new chapter of their life. Find hobbies that interest them like art, yoga, horseback riding, or sailing. If they like motorcycles, they might consider joining a motorcycle club. Motorcycle clubs have large numbers veterans who join to feel the comradery they had while in the service. Veterans could look into programs that match shelter animals with veterans as support animals. Perhaps they might volunteer at animal shelters. A major theme to come out of *Project 22* is helping is healing. When veterans reach out to help other veterans, they end up to healing themselves (King, 2015). They can volunteer at a veteran's home or start a group for veterans. In San Antonio, Texas there is a group called *Cigar Night for Vets*, which gets veterans together to smokes cigars and chat. The group's goal is for no veteran to feel alone. It is important that veterans remember not to give up. They can feel complete again. They can have purpose outside of the military.

Up to 22 Veterans a day are committing suicide, but now knowing some of the reasons behind their actions such as feeling isolated, lack of knowledge of available resources and the stigma attached to receiving care for mental health issues, can help. People should reach out to those they think are struggling. They can let them know there is no shame in asking for help. The community can help them find available resources in their area. When veterans are aware of resources available to them, the number of suicides can be reduced. Ultimately, the choice is up to them, but they need support. They need to know that the people of our country are grateful for their service and they care for them even when the uniform comes off.

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