

Suicide and PTSD

This fact sheet discusses the relation between trauma, PTSD, and suicide. It may help you understand more about suicide.

Know the signs

Watch for these key suicide warning signs, and provide the Lifeline number to anyone exhibiting them.

- Talking about wanting to hurt or kill oneself
- Trying to get pills, guns, or other ways to harm oneself
- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide
- Hopelessness Rage, uncontrolled anger, seeking revenge
- Acting in a reckless or risky way
- Feeling trapped, like there is no way out
- Saying or feeling there's no reason for living

How common is suicide?

No matter what the rates are, suicide is always very tragic. It is hard to say exactly how many suicides occur. Often suicides are not reported. It can be hard to know whether or not a person meant to kill himself or herself. For a suicide to be declared, examiners must be able to say that the deceased meant to die. Also, the way deaths are tracked and coded has changed over time.

Overall, men have higher rates of suicide than women. For example in 2005, the suicide rate among US males was 23.19 per 100,000, compared to 5.65 in females. This difference between men and women is also true among veterans.

Does trauma or PTSD increase a person's suicide risk?

Going through a trauma may increase a person's suicide risk. US studies also show that suicide risk is higher in persons with PTSD. Some studies have found that combat trauma is related to suicide, while other studies have not. Of combat trauma survivors, those who were wounded more than once or put in the hospital for a wound have the highest suicide risk. This suggests suicide risk in veterans may be affected by how intense and how often the combat trauma was.

Why is suicide risk higher in trauma survivors? It may be because of the symptoms of PTSD or it may be due to other mental health problems. Some US studies link suicide risk in those with PTSD to distressing trauma memories, anger, and poor control of impulses. Further, suicide risk is higher for those with PTSD who have certain styles of coping with stress, such as not expressing feelings.

US research suggests that for veterans, the strongest link to both suicide attempts and thinking about suicide is guilt related to combat. Many veterans have very disturbing thoughts and extreme guilt about actions taken during times of war. These thoughts can often overwhelm the veteran and make it hard for him or her to deal with the intense feelings.

What can I do?

If you are ever thinking about suicide and feel unsafe contact VVCS on 1800 011 046 (free 24 hours, 7 days).

Everyone feels down from time to time. Feeling like killing yourself, however, is not normal. If you have thoughts about hurting yourself, seek professional help. Many people who have thoughts of suicide also struggle with depression or with drinking or drug problems. There are many places to get help.



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Your non-military, non-government, confidential volunteer help and support service



Australia

Veterans & Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS)

Phone: 1800 011 046 – 24 hrs, 7 days



New Zealand

Veterans' Affairs New Zealand (VANZ)

NZ Freephone: 0800 4 838372

International: +0011 64 7 859 7676

8am-5pm Monday to Friday (NZ time)

Someone I know is suicidal

You may come in contact sometime with a family member, friend, or co-worker who is thinking about suicide. When someone tells you they have these thoughts, you may feel overwhelmed and scared. It is even harder if the person tells you in secret and you feel pressure not to tell others.

If someone you know is thinking about suicide, this is a serious matter. Though the person may not in fact hurt himself or herself, it can be very hard to assess the level of danger. A mental health professional is the best person to decide how much danger there is.

You can help the person by staying calm and telling them about mental health options in the area. Often the hardest part of getting treatment is making the first call to a mental health provider. It is usually easier if the person who is thinking about suicide has help with this contact. Please see the resources listed above for phone numbers you can call for help. While helping someone who is thinking about suicide can be hard, keep in mind that the help you give could save someone's life.

Someone I know has committed suicide

It is very upsetting when someone you know commits suicide. Getting over the shock and distress will be especially hard if you felt close to the victim, if you saw the event, or if you have your own mental health issues.

Grieving the loss of a loved one is a natural process. It may take several months to feel 'normal' again after someone you know commits suicide. Due to the traumatic nature of suicide, you may go through what's known as 'traumatic grief'. If you are feeling intense grief or guilt several months after the suicide, contact a mental health provider for help. Many people feel guilty about not having prevented the suicide. Be aware, though, that suicide is never your fault. Suicide is complex with many factors that can contribute.

This fact sheet was based on a more detailed version: United States National Center for PTSD - The Relationship Between PTSD and Suicide.

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