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Office of Rural Health

5.1 Understanding Risk Factors for Suicide And How It Can Impact Families

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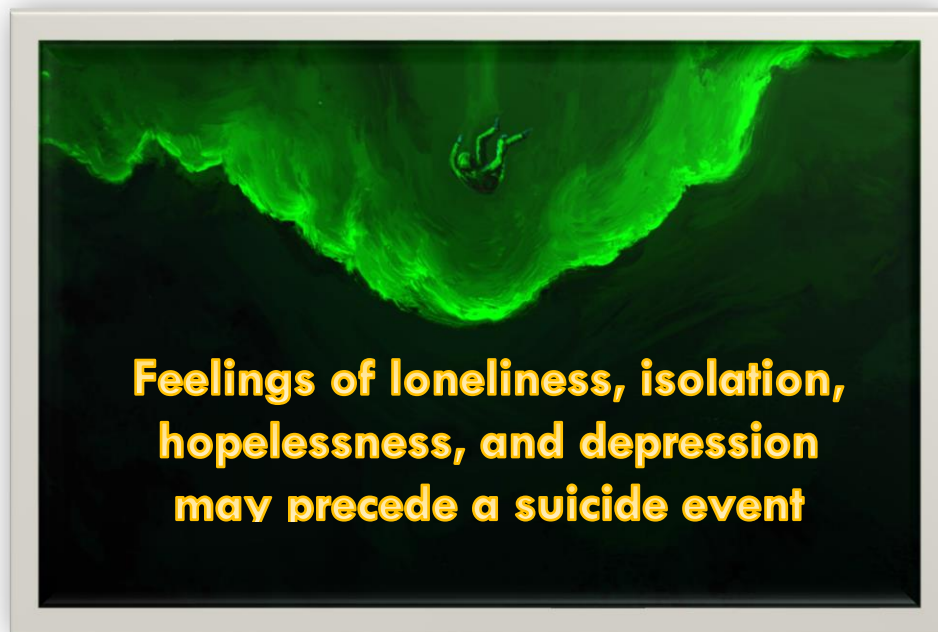
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Facts About Suicide

Suicide is a complex phenomenon. It is a public health challenge that causes immense pain among individuals, families, and communities nationwide (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2020).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is a significant public health issue and among the top ten causes of death in the United States. Over 48,000 people died by suicide in 2021. This is one death every 11 minutes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).

Before 2000, suicide rates for service members and Veterans were lower than in the civilian population. However, over the last 20 years, rates have increased and currently exceed the civilian rate (Inoue et al., 2023). According to the 2022 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, suicide was the 13th leading cause of death among Veterans in 2020 and it was the second leading cause of death among Veterans under the age of 45 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023). While the Veteran suicide rate during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 was lower than in 2019, the incidence remained high, with approximately 21 Veterans dying by suicide daily. This is 50% higher than the general U.S. adult population (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023). Several factors play a part in higher suicide rates among Veterans and differ based on age and gender.



The suicide and crisis Lifeline number is: 988

According to a study conducted with Veterans about suicide risk and effective interventions, common feelings described by Veterans that may precede a suicide event were feelings of loneliness, isolation, hopelessness, and depression. Veterans also experienced distress due to substance abuse, reported feeling irritated due to sleep disturbances, and felt despair related to managing mental health conditions (Montross et al., 2014). Another study found that roughly 30% of Army suicides and over 45% of suicide attempts since 2003 involved alcohol or drug use. During that time frame, it was estimated that 20% of high-risk behavior deaths were attributed to alcohol or drug overdose (Teeters et al., 2017)

What Are Suicide Risk Factors?

Risk factors for suicide are situations, behaviors or characteristics that may increase the likelihood for a person to attempt to or take their own life (Military One Source, 2021). Risk factors are similar but not entirely the same for service members compared to Veterans (Figure 5.1 a).

Service Members' Risk Factors	Veterans Risk Factors
Alcohol and drug abuse	Increased alcohol and drug consumption
Difficulties to adapt after deployment	Stress and burnout
History of family abuse or trauma	High exposure to trauma
Access to guns or medication	Access and familiarity to guns
Difficulties to transition to civilian life	Difficulties in adapting to civilian life
Financial or legal problems	Feelings of isolation and loneliness
Loss from death or suicide	Witnessing the death of other veterans
Disciplinary action	

Figure 5.1a
Suicide Risk Factors For Service Members vs Suicide Risk Factors for Veterans
Source
DeAngelis, 2022

Life circumstances, for instance, such as being a young, enlisted member, having difficulties adapting after deployment, having access to firearms or medications, and having financial or legal problems, can increase the chances of a suicide attempt. There are many other situations that could increase the chances of a suicide attempt, including psychological issues such as a history of family abuse or trauma, depression, prior suicide attempts, aggressiveness, alcohol and drug abuse, overwhelming grief from a loss, cultural issues such as limited access to healthcare,

religious beliefs, or little social and family support (Military One Source, 2021). Feelings of intense emotional pain can lead to a suicide attempt as individuals at risk have particular ways of thinking about themselves and others that significantly increase the risk. For Veterans, on the other hand, high exposure to trauma, stress and burnout, isolation and loneliness, difficulties in reintegrating into civilian life, and access to and familiarity with guns (DeAngelis, 2022). Understanding when a person is at risk and recognizing the warning signs can help prevent suicide attempts and ensure the person gets help.

Warning Signs: How to Recognize Whether a Person is Suicidal?

Whether someone is a Veteran or not, a person who is in crisis may show different warning signs for suicide attempts (Figure 5.1b). All of them require attention, but some require immediate action. Some people could joke about suicide when they are having suicidal thoughts. Others may appear relaxed or happier than usual because they have decided to take their life and feel at ease by making that decision. However, not everyone who attempts to commit suicide shows warning signs. Nevertheless, warning signs of suicide should always be taken seriously, even if the person seems to be joking (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.).

Other warning signs to be aware of include creating a plan for how or when to commit suicide, frequently talking, writing, or drawing about death or about objects that can cause harm, behaving violently, such as punching holes in walls, getting into fights, or engaging in activities that can cause self-harm. Additionally, feelings of rage, anger, and revenge-seeking can be warning signs. Also, giving away highly valued possessions, putting affairs in order, tying up loose ends, and/or writing a will could be a clue to a person's intent to attempt suicide (Military One Source, 2021).

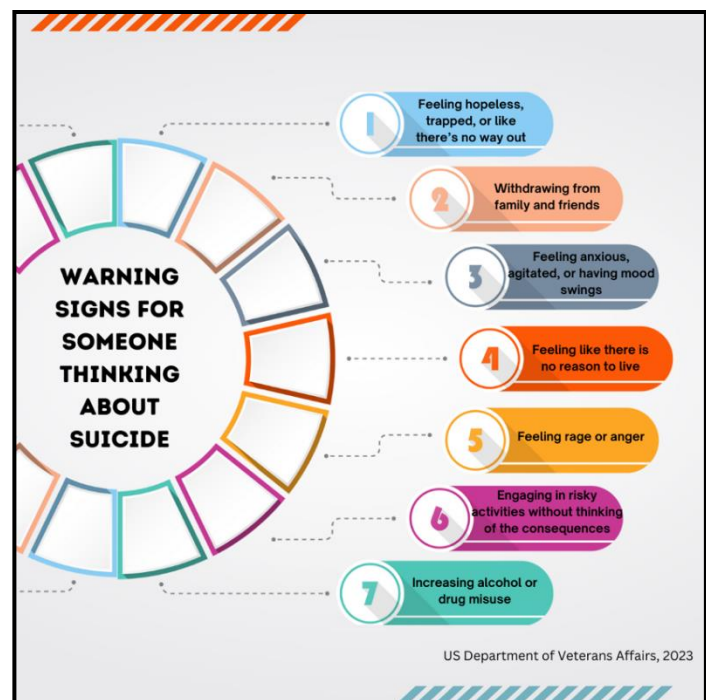


Figure 5.1b
Warning Signs for a Person Thinking about Suicide
Source
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023.

Impact that Suicide Can Have On Families

It is estimated that for every suicide, there are at least six survivors. Based on this estimate, during the last 25 years, 6 million Americans became survivors of suicide (Western Michigan University, n.d.). When someone takes their own life, it can negatively impact those who are close to that person, such as parents, spouses, siblings, friends, and co-workers (Richman, 2016).

However, according to the literature, little is known about how suicide impacts the mental health of families, loved ones, and surviving Veterans. Among civilian populations, exposure to suicide, or experiencing another person taking their life, is associated with feelings of rejection and shame, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), prolonged grief, and suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts. Survivors may blame themselves or others for not doing more to help the Service Member or Veteran (Figure 5.1c) (Peterson et al., 2020; U.S. Department of Defense: Defense Suicide Prevention Office, 2021).

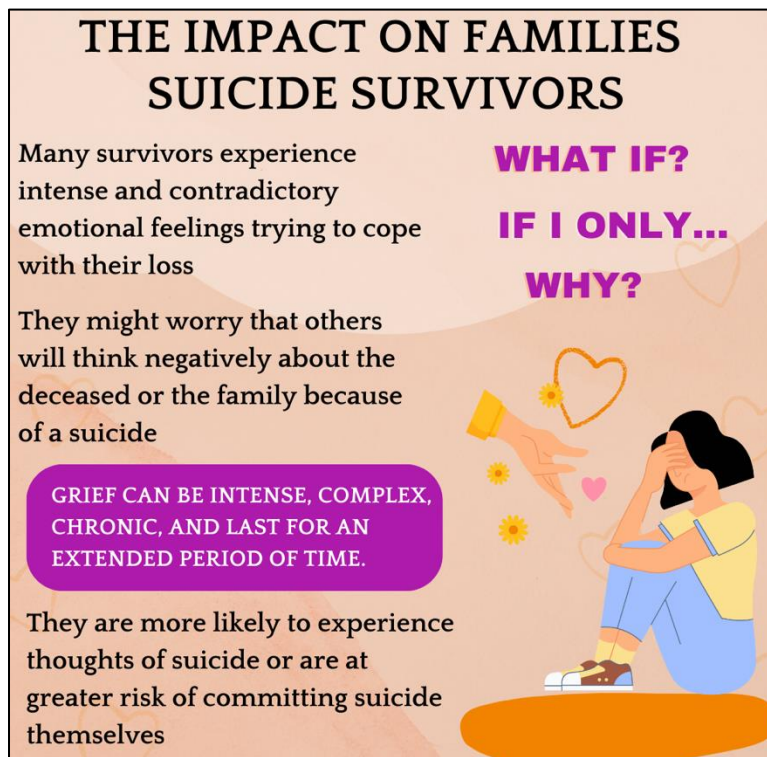


Figure 5.1c

The Impact of Suicide on Families

Source

Peterson et al., 2020; U.S. Department of Defense: Defense Suicide Prevention Office, 2021

Grieving a Person You Loved Who Died by Suicide

When a person loses someone they love to suicide, it is usually shocking, painful and unexpected. Grief is an individual and unique process that each person will experience in their own way and at their own pace. It can be intense, complex, chronic, and last for an extended period. It does not follow a linear path nor move in a forward direction. There is no time frame for grief. Survivors must continue their lives without their loved ones and adapt (Western Michigan University, n.d.).

Survivors often are tormented by the reasons why the suicide occurred and whether they could have done something to prevent it. Feelings of guilt typically ensue if the survivor believes their loved one's suicide could have been prevented. However, if the loved one had a mental disorder, the survivor may experience relief. Children may share the same feelings as adults, but the expression of that grief might differ as children have more difficulties expressing their feelings (Western Michigan University, n.d.). They are also at high risk of mental health challenges, including depression and PTSD (Dean, 2023).

Shame or embarrassment might prevent survivors from reaching out for help. Stigma, ignorance, and uncertainty might also deter others from giving the necessary support or understanding. Ongoing support is essential to maintain family and friendship relations during the time that grief lasts (American Association of Suicidology, n.d.).

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