



Ask the Question: Preventing Veteran Suicide

Any number of experiences before, during or after military service can trigger a crisis. Those experiences – from combat, to high pressure situations, personal loss to transitioning out of service can make those moments feel even heavier.

PTSD is a normal response to what many veterans go through before, during and after combat. It can also result from non-combat events like military sexual trauma or other stressors experienced before, during or after their military service.

If you're worried about a veteran who might be thinking about suicide, it's important to ask the question: *Are you thinking about suicide?*

Warning Signs of Suicide:

If a person talks about:

- Wanting to die
- Feeling hopeless
- Having no reason to live
- Being a burden to others
- Feeling trapped
- Unbearable pain

People who are considering suicide may display one or more of the following:

- Depression
- Fatigue
- Anxiety
- Loss of interest in things they usually enjoy
- Humiliation or shame
- Agitation, aggression, irritation or anger

Behaviors that may signal risk:

- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Looking for a way to end their lives
- Withdrawing from activities or relationships
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Changing behavior or the presence of entirely new behaviors, especially when related to a major life event
- Speaking with resignation in their voice, or saying things like, "I don't care anymore" or "I'm done."

What you can do:



Take firearms offsite to a trusted friend or family member. You can also call local police or a gun range for temporary storage. Or, store them unloaded in a safe or combination-locked location.



Remove access to other weapons and sharp objects like knives or razor blades.



Store all medications in a lock box or locked medicine cabinet. Throw away unused medications.



Keep alcohol and illegal drugs out of the home.



Lock up pesticides and other poisonous household chemicals.



Provide supervision or stay with a person who reports suicidal thoughts until receiving a mental health evaluation.

Sources: Krames, The StayWell Company, LLC., National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute of Mental Health, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health Helpline Center.

If you're worried about a veteran, the most important thing you can do is ask:

"Are you thinking about suicide?"

Asking won't cause harm — it could start an important conversation.

How to Ask the Question

If they say yes, ask them: *Can I talk more with you about those thoughts?* Find out as much as you can: *Have you thought about a plan of how you would attempt suicide? Have you thought about when you may attempt suicide?* The more detailed the plan and the more likely it is that the person has the ability to act on the plan, the more danger they are in right now.

If there is a risk of suicide, **call the Veterans Crisis Line at 988 and then press 1** to speak with a trained Veterans Crisis Line responder available 24/7 or go to your local emergency room. Don't wait. Don't leave the person alone.

Visit Avera.org/BehavioralHealth to find resources in your area.

Veterans take care of each other. If you're a veteran, you know how hard it is to speak up and share. Be open, be honest and don't be afraid to use the word suicide. It won't give them ideas; instead, it may give them relief. Use a non-judgmental, matter-of-fact approach. Be sure to tell them: *Your feelings are understandable. I care about you. I want to support you. I am proud of you for sharing your feelings.*

Research shows that offering someone a safe place to open up about their thoughts and feelings can be an important step into getting them the help they need. It also shows them someone cares about their well-being. Asking about the way they will try suicide is also shown to make a difference.

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