

Suicide Prevention: A Guide for Military and Veteran Families



If someone you care about is experiencing suicidal thoughts or behaviors, you may feel scared or overwhelmed. This guide can help you understand what may contribute to risk for suicide, how mental health care and protective factors may help reduce risk, and what you can do to support your loved one's care.

What are suicide risk factors?



- A risk factor is something that has been connected to a certain event, like suicide, when studied in large groups of people
- Risk factors may impact someone suddenly (acute) or be present for a long time (chronic)
- Health care providers collect information about risk factors to determine what level of care may be needed
- Risk factors cannot predict suicide, but they can help identify who may be at risk and why, which can be used to plan effective care¹
- Risk factors associated with suicide include:¹
 - Self-directed violence (SDV) thoughts and behaviors
 - Current psychiatric conditions and current or past mental health treatment
 - Psychiatric symptoms
 - Social determinants of health and adverse life events
 - Availability of lethal means

What are suicide protective factors?



- A protective factor is a characteristic associated with a lower probability of negative health outcomes¹
- Protective factors can be enhanced to reduce suicide risk
- Protective factors associated with a reduced risk of suicide include:¹
 - Access to mental health care
 - Sense of connectedness
 - Problem-solving skills
 - Sense of spirituality
 - Mission or purpose

What are suicide warning signs?



- A suicide warning sign is a person-specific thought, feeling, physical sensation, behavior, or any combination of the foregoing that indicates the presence of acute risk,¹ and needs immediate attention
- Get help if you observe the following warning signs in your loved one:¹
 - Suicide related communication (e.g., suicide note, mention of wishing to die)
 - Preparation for suicide (e.g., giving items away)
 - Seeking access or recent use of lethal means
 - Using substances increasingly or excessively
 - Hopelessness: feels that nothing can be done to improve the situation
 - Purposelessness: feels no sense of purpose, no reason for living
 - Anger: exhibits rage, seeks revenge
 - Recklessness: engages impulsively in risky behavior
 - Feeling trapped: experiences feelings of being trapped with no way out
 - Social withdrawal: withdraws from family, friends, society
 - Anxiety: feels agitated or irritable, wants to “jump out of my skin”
 - Mood changes: exhibits dramatic changes in mood, lack of interest in usual activities
 - Sleep disturbances: experiences insomnia, inability to sleep, or sleeping all the time
 - Guilt or shame: expresses overwhelming self-blame or remorse

How can I get help?

- Risk for suicide can change over time, and you can play an important role in keeping your loved one safe by knowing when and how to seek help
- Help is available 24/7 at your nearest emergency room; you can also contact your local mental health clinic or your primary care clinic
- If you cannot access a clinic or would like to speak to someone immediately, you can talk to a trained responder by calling the Veterans Crisis Line at 988 then Press 1; you do not have to have VA/DOD benefits or health care to call²

What should I know about treatment?



- Evidence-based interventions to help reduce risk for suicide thoughts or behaviors are available¹
- Health care providers may determine that your loved one is currently at low, intermediate, or high acute risk for suicide; individuals at high risk may require inpatient hospitalization while they begin treatment¹
- The goal of treatment is to decrease symptoms and lessen your loved one's thoughts of hurting themselves, while planning for times when suicide thoughts might happen²
- Health care providers may ask you to participate in developing a plan to keep your loved one safe; this is often called a safety plan; plans usually involve identifying stressors or triggers that can be paired with specific coping skills and identification of support people; plans may also spell out how to limit access to dangerous items and locate local support resources¹
- If your loved one has been hospitalized, ask them and their health care team if there is a safety plan you can support to help keep them safe when they return home
- You may have questions or concerns about protecting health information or how seeking care may impact your family member's career; if so, here's a resource on mental health and [confidentiality](#) for service members

Resources



Military OneSource provides 24/7 support and information on housing, financial, legal, medical, and psychological services.

- State-side: 800-342-9647
- Overseas: 800-342-9647
- Collect: 484-530-5908

militaryonesource.mil



988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline and the associated **Military/Veterans Crisis Line** provides free and confidential support for individuals in crisis. If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, call, or text 988 or 988lifeline.org; you can also press 1 or text 838255 to chat live with a counselor focused on military and veteran callers. For OCONUS calling options and online chat accessible from anywhere in the world, visit militarycrisisline.net



inTransition offers specialized coaching and assistance for active duty service members, National Guard members, reservists, veterans, and retirees to help them adapt to their transitions between systems of mental health care.

- State-side: 800-424-7877
- Overseas: 800-748-81111 (in Australia, Germany, Italy, Japan, and South Korea only)

health.mil/inTransition



Real Warriors Campaign is a public health campaign designed to decrease stigma, increase psychological health literacy, and open doors to access care by encouraging service members, veterans, and their families to seek psychological health support. Reaching out is a sign of strength.

health.mil/RealWarriors

References

- 1 Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense. (2024). *VA/DOD Clinical Practice Guideline for Assessment and Management of Patients at Risk for Suicide*. Version 3.0. <https://www.healthquality.va.gov/guidelines/MH/srb/>
- 2 Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense (2024). *VA/DOD Clinical Practice Guideline for the Assessment and Management of Patients at Risk for Suicide – Patient Summary*. <https://www.healthquality.va.gov/guidelines/MH/srb/>

