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Caregivers Battling Suicide on the Homefront

Friday, March 30th, 2012



Between 2005 and 2010, approximately one service member died every 36 hours, not by Afghanistan or Iraq insurgents, not from a result of a training exercise or automobile accident—but from suicide.

In 2009 alone, 160 active duty military personnel took their lives, making suicide the third leading cause of death among the Army population (Army HP/RR/SP Report, 2010).

As more troops return home from deployment, the risk of suicide may grow. It is important that families of these service members become aware of the issue and learn to identify potential risk factors and warning signs associated with suicide. Remember, as a caregiver—the more you know, the more you are likely to provide proper care and provide the immediate attention your service member needs and ultimately prevent the loss or injury of your loved one.

Understanding Suicide Prevention

Risk Factors

Several factors may be taken into account for someone to attempt or commit suicide. As a military caregiver, you should become aware of these risk factors associated with suicide.

- » Failed intimate relationship or relationship strain
- » Family history of suicide or suicide attempts
- » History of depression or other psychological issues
- » Significant loss (death of loved one or fellow service member within unit)
- » Drug or alcohol abuse
- » Violence in the home or social environment
- » Recent disciplinary or legal actions
- » Serious medical problems or physical illness
- » Work-related problems
- » Excessive debt and other financial problems



Warning Signs of Potential Suicide

If you notice substantial changes in your loved one's demeanor since he or she has returned home from combat, he or she may be exemplifying signs of potential suicide. The following warning signs may lead you to indicate that your service member is suicidal:

- » Changes in eating, sleeping habits, or personal hygiene
- » Talking or hinting about committing suicide
- » Expressing a strong desire to kill someone else
- » Obsession with death (for example, in music, poetry, artwork, letters)
- » Changes in mood (for example, depression, irritability, rage, anger)
- » Increased alcohol and/or drug use or abuse
- » Isolation and withdrawal from social situations
- » Giving away possessions
- » Expressing feelings of sadness, hopelessness, anxiety
- » Making a will or otherwise finalizing personal affairs
- » Problem with spouse or partner
- » Sudden or impulsive purchase of a firearm or obtaining other means of killing oneself such as poisons or medications



Caregiving Strategies

As a military caregiver, it can be hard to admit to yourself that your service member may be displaying signs of suicide. However, in today's society where suicide has increased dramatically since the start of the global war on terrorism, many service members are at risk. In addition to identifying risk factors and warning signs, there are strategies that you, as the caregiver can do to help your loved one and yourself get thought this difficult time.

- » Look for any signs that show a deviation from your service member's usual self.
- » Get help immediately! A suicidal person needs immediate attention.
- » Do not keep your warrior's suicidal behavior a secret.
- » Do not ignore the situation and hope that things will eventually get better.
- » Talk openly about suicide. Be willing to listen and allow your loved one to express his/her feelings.
- » Actively listen for details about what, where and when your service member may be planning on killing himself or herself.
- » Actively listen without passing judgment.
- » Stay calm and safe—do not use force.
- » Provide a comforting and relaxing atmosphere.
- » Never leave the service member alone.
- » Escort warrior to his/her chain of command immediately.
- » Understand that your loved one may be in pain.
- » Remove any means that could be used for self-injury (for example, weapons or pills).
- » Provide your service member with contacts for suicide prevention (for example, a chaplain or behavioral health professional).
- » Be in control of the service member's medications.
- » Be aware of how the service member's behavior is affecting any children in the household.
- » Consider individual and family therapy.
- » Ask your service member's doctors or nurse case manager on information regarding suicide and mental illness.
- » Seek spiritual healing.
- » Take care of yourself!



Caregiver Resources


If your loved one is experiencing thoughts or symptoms of suicide—do not hesitate, call the [Veterans Crisis Line](#) at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) for immediate assistance.

Also, contact your local Army installation's [Soldier and Family Assistance Center](#) (SFAC) for support groups and caregiver support services.

For more information on suicide within the military, visit the [Army Suicide Prevention Program](#). The program offers a variety of information and resources relating to suicide in order to improve readiness for service members and their families.

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- » MilFamLN: RT @MilChildCare: Making list of YOUNG kids' books to help milkids deal w/ hard situations (deployment, etc) for a webinar.What's your fave? April 14, 2012
- » MilFamLN: @TexasVLB @SSGRJ Thank you for the mentions and #FF April 13, 2012

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