

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

SUICIDE PREVENTION

Outreach Toolkit

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

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Overview

Suicide is a national public health concern that affects all Americans, including Veterans, their families, and their friends. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) top clinical priority is preventing suicide among all Veterans. VA develops and implements a variety of communications products, tools, and strategies to raise awareness of Veteran suicide prevention.

This toolkit includes suicide prevention resources and messages to share online and in person within your organization.

Thank you for helping to spread the word that everyone has a role to play in preventing Veteran suicide. Your participation is key to engaging community members nationwide in suicide prevention efforts.

Facts about suicide prevention

- **Fact: Suicide can be prevented, and support is available.**
 - Find suicide prevention resources at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Get-Help/Local-Resources.
- **Fact: Asking a Veteran if they're considering suicide will not increase their risk and could save their life.**
 - Learn how to talk with a Veteran in crisis. MentalHealth.VA.gov/suicide_prevention/prevention/index.asp#save.
- **Fact: Anyone can help a Veteran in crisis. VA S.A.V.E. Training can show you where to start.**
 - You don't have to be an expert to talk to a Veteran facing challenges. You just need to show genuine care and concern. Learn more at <https://learn.psycharmor.org/courses/va-save>.
- **Fact: Veterans Crisis Line responders are specially trained to provide support no matter what you're experiencing. Many are Veterans themselves.**
 - Read more about the Veterans Crisis Line at VeteransCrisisLine.net/About.

Key suicide prevention messages

- Suicide is preventable and there is hope.
- Everyone has a role to play in suicide prevention.
- You don't need special training to show a Veteran you care. It can be as simple as asking, "How are you doing?" or "What's going on?"
- Asking someone if they're having thoughts of suicide does not put the idea into their head. It can be a tough question, but it may help someone connect with the support they need.
- If you're facing a crisis, you're not alone. It's not always easy to open up, but there are people who want to listen. The Veterans Crisis Line is available 24/7 every day of the year: **Dial 988 then Press 1**, chat at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat, or text **838255**. You don't have to be enrolled in VA benefits or health care to connect.

Recognizing the signs of suicidal crisis

There is no single cause of suicide. Every Veteran is different, and many may not show any obvious signs of intent to kill themselves. But some actions and behaviors can be a sign they need help.

- Take immediate action and call 911 if you experience any of these **crisis signs**:
 - Thinking about hurting or killing yourself
 - Looking for ways to kill yourself
 - Talking about death, dying, or suicide
 - Self-destructive behavior, such as drug abuse, risky use of weapons, etc.

- Contact the Veterans Crisis Line—**Dial 988 then Press 1**—if you experience any of these **warning signs**:
 - Hopelessness, feeling there's no way out
 - Anxiety, agitation, sleeplessness, or mood swings
 - Feeling like there is no reason to live
 - Rage or anger
 - Engaging in risky activities without thinking
 - Increasing alcohol or drug abuse
 - Withdrawing from family and friends

Risk factors are associated with an increased likelihood of suicide

Knowing about risk factors can help to provide Veterans with support and potentially prevent a crisis. Risk factors for suicide include:

- Prior suicide attempts (the period immediately following a suicide attempt is one of high risk)
- Certain mental health conditions or substance use disorders
- Access to lethal means, such as firearms or certain medications
- Stressful life events, such as divorce, job loss, or the death of a loved one
- Transition-related challenges
- Posttraumatic stress disorder
- Traumatic brain injury
- Experience with firearms

It's important to note, however, the presence of these risk factors does not guarantee that someone will die by suicide or even attempt to kill themselves.

Protective factors can help offset risk factors

To prevent Veteran suicide, we must work together to increase protective factors while decreasing risk factors in communities across the nation. Examples of protective factors include:

- Access to mental health care
- Access to care for substance use disorders
- Feeling connected to others
- Sense of belonging and purpose through military service
- Adaptive spiritual functioning
- Positive coping skills

How to help reduce stigma

- Encourage Veterans to talk about their service.
- Normalize conversations about suicide, mental health, and seeking treatment.
- If you're concerned about a Veteran you care about, ask directly, "Are you thinking about killing yourself?"
 - Remember: How you ask about suicidal thoughts is very important. Don't inject judgment or emotion—ask calmly in a way that doesn't come across as though you want them to answer "no."
- Supporters and health care providers may feel uncomfortable talking about suicide with the Veterans in their life. But talking about suicide does not put the thought into their head or increase their risk, and it could save their life.

What the Veterans Crisis Line does to help Veterans

- Veterans in crisis and their families and friends can connect with qualified, caring VA responders through a toll-free hotline, online chat, or text-messaging service.
 - **Dial 988 then Press 1**
 - Chat online at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat
 - Text **838255**
- No matter what a Veteran is experiencing, Veterans Crisis Line responders are available 24/7 to listen and help.
- The Veterans Crisis Line is a critical resource giving Veterans and their supporters free, confidential crisis support. Callers decide how much information to share with the responder.
- If a Veteran you care about is apprehensive about calling the Veterans Crisis Line, you can show support by calling together.
- Whether a Veteran calls, chats, or texts with the Veterans Crisis Line, the support doesn't have to end when the conversation is over.
 - Veterans Crisis Line responders can connect Veterans or their loved ones with the resources they need.
 - If the Veteran decides to share their contact information, the suicide prevention coordinator (SPC) at the nearest VA medical center will be in contact the next business day.
 - SPCs can connect Veterans to the counseling and services they need.
- Veterans don't have to be enrolled in VA benefits or health care to contact the Veterans Crisis Line.

How to communicate and write about Veteran suicide

- Use appropriate language:
 - Be informative and objective without being sensationalistic. Use the terms “died by suicide” or “killed himself/herself/themselves.”
 - Avoid detailing the method of suicide and using terms such as “commit suicide,” “successful/unsuccessful suicide,” “completed or uncompleted suicide,” or “failed suicide attempt.”
 - Avoid using words like “heroic” or “warrior.”
- Report on suicide as a public health issue:
 - Suicide does not discriminate; according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), it’s a leading cause of death among all Americans, not just Veterans.
 - Use non-sensational, objective terms, such as “higher” or “increasing,” to refer to differences in suicide rates.
 - Avoid referring to suicide as an epidemic. Avoid terms such as “skyrockets” or “surges.”
- Use current Veteran suicide data:
 - Use current Veteran suicide data. When presenting statistics, make sure you and your audience understand the context behind the data, such as information on suicide in the United States as a whole.
 - Consult with subject matter experts for more information about suicide prevention.
 - Avoid presenting the number of Veteran deaths by day as the only statistic as it does not accurately reflect the full scope of the issue.
 - Avoid stating increases or decreases over short periods of time as indications of trends. Even emergent trends do not become apparent until years or even decades have passed.
 - For the latest VA data, visit [MentalHealth.VA.gov/suicide_prevention/data.asp](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/data.asp).
- Ask an expert:
 - Interview a suicide prevention expert, such as a VA researcher, or mental health professional, or local SPC who can provide information on risk factors and treatment of suicidality.
 - Find VA researchers at hsrd.research.va.gov or research.va.gov.
 - Find a local VA SPC at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/ResourceLocator](https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/ResourceLocator).
 - Avoid interviewing first responders (police, EMT, etc.) about the circumstances surrounding the death.
- Portray posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a treatable condition:
 - Portray PTSD as a treatable condition that can affect anyone, at any age. Not all Veterans have PTSD, and PTSD does not always cause suicide or suicidal ideation.
 - Note that many Veterans who die by suicide have no diagnosed mental health conditions. Chronic physical pain, among many other factors, can be a significant contributor to thoughts of suicide.
 - More information on PTSD is available at [PTSD.VA.gov](https://www.ptsd.va.gov).

- More information on recognizing the warning signs of a Veteran in crisis is available at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Education/Signs-of-Crisis](https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/Education/Signs-of-Crisis).
- Avoid saying the suicide was random or was caused by a single or specific event.
- Avoid implying all Veterans have PTSD, that PTSD is the sole cause of suicide, or that PTSD is untreatable.
- Avoid implying all suicides are caused by mental health conditions, like depression, anxiety, borderline personality disorder, etc.
- Avoid the use of “disorder” when referring to physical and mental health conditions unless it’s part of an official diagnosis.
- Emphasize help and recovery:
 - Because suicide prevention is possible, convey or provide stories of hope and feature elements that can lead to a life worth living. Acknowledge life’s challenges can be difficult for anyone, and help is available. Inform your audience about how they can find support and access resources.
 - For inspirational stories of Veterans overcoming life challenges, visit [MakeTheConnection.net](https://www.maketheconnection.net).
 - Information on the importance of communication about suicide can be found at reportingonsuicide.org/recommendations. In the Recommendations section, click Expand All for information related to each topic.
 - Reinforce stories of connection and help seeking.
 - Reinforce effective treatment, secure storage of firearms, and other interventions that have shown reductions in suicides.
 - Avoid statements that discourage people from seeking help, romanticize death, or reinforce the inaccurate belief that nothing can be done about thoughts of suicide or concerning behaviors.
- Include resources
 - Provide readily accessible resources, including the Veterans Crisis Line (if talking to Veterans) or the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (if talking to the general public):
 - Veterans Crisis Line—Available 24/7/365
 - **Dial 988 then Press 1**
 - Chat online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/Chat)
 - Text **838255**
 - 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline—Available 24/7/365
 - Call 988
 - Chat online at 988lifeline.org/chat
 - Additional suicide prevention resources can be found at: https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/index.asp. Avoid discussing suicide without listing resources or help lines.
- Show images of hope and support
 - Show logos of the Veterans Crisis Line (if talking to Veterans) or the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (if talking to the general public).
 - Show images of hope and support. Provide imagery that encourages connectedness.
 - Avoid showing images of the location or method of suicide.

- Avoid showing graphic imagery related to suicide.
- Avoid stereotyped imagery of individuals behaving in manners that depict mental illness (e.g., “headclutchers”).
- Avoid imagery that can be peripherally associated with suicide—ropes, tall buildings or views from above, bridges, individuals holding firearms, etc.

Additional safe messaging resources:

- [Action Alliance Framework for Successful Messaging](#): A resource to help people communicate about suicide by developing messages that are strategic, safe, positive, and make use of relevant guidelines and best practices.
- [Reporting on Suicide](#): This website presents research-based recommendations for reporting on suicide, including suggestions for online media, message boards, bloggers, and “citizen journalists.”

What to post on social media

More and more Veterans are using social media as a major communications tool. The conversations that used to happen in person or over the phone are now taking place through platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. If you use these or other platforms, it’s vital to know what to do if you spot content that makes you concerned for a Veteran.

VA’s [Social Media Safety Toolkit](#) will help you learn how to recognize concerning content on social media and steps to take to help keep Veterans safe.

You can also proactively post helpful information. The social media posts and graphics linked below promote VA’s suicide prevention and mental health information and resources, like the Veterans Crisis Line.

- [Veterans Crisis Line content calendar](#)
- [Make the Connection content calendar](#)

You can also check out VA’s social media accounts—we encourage you to share posts about suicide prevention and mental health-based resources from VA’s [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#) accounts.

In addition, consider using #SuicidePrevention, #SuicideAwareness, #VeteransCrisisLine, and #Veteran in relevant posts.

Resources to share with Veterans and their supporters

- Suicide prevention and mental health resources
 - [KeepItSecure.net](#): Practice safe storage of firearms, medication, and other lethal means and learn how to identify and handle a suicidal crisis.
 - [Make the Connection](#): VA’s premier mental health literacy and anti-stigma website highlights Veterans’ real, inspiring stories of recovery and connects Veterans and their family members and friends with local resources.

- **Don't wait. Reach Out:** Get support designed specifically for you. Family members or friends can find resources for the Veterans in your life.
- **VA Mental Health:** VA's repository of mental health resources, information, and data materials.
- **VA S.A.V.E. Training:** Training designed to teach anyone who interacts with Veterans how to recognize warning signs of crisis and what to do to help a Veteran who may be at risk.
 - **Do you want to take VA S.A.V.E. Training?** Go to learn.psycharmor.org/courses/va-save to take the course online, or contact your local suicide prevention coordinator to schedule in-person training: VeteransCrisisLine.net/Find-Resources/Local-Resources/.
- **VA Suicide Prevention:** Explore suicide prevention resources to build networks of support among community-based organizations, Veterans Service Organizations, health care providers, and other members of your community that strengthen protective factors for Veterans.
- **VA Resource Locator:** This tool can help Veterans find local mental health and suicide prevention resources, including their local suicide prevention coordinator.
- **Veterans Crisis Line:** If you're a Veteran in crisis or concerned about one, contact the Veterans Crisis Line to receive 24/7 confidential support. You don't have to be enrolled in VA benefits or health care to connect. To reach responders, **Dial 988 then Press 1**, chat online at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat, or text **838255**.
- Additional resources
 - **MyVA411:** Veterans, their families, and caregivers can call 1-800-MyVA411 (800-698-2411) to easily access information on VA benefits and services.
 - **Safety Planning:** This resource provides information on safety planning and a template for developing a safety plan. A safety plan is a written list of coping strategies and sources of support that at-risk Veterans can use before or during a suicidal crisis.
 - **VA.gov:** Access and manage information about your VA benefits, health care, disability, education, and more.
 - **VA Solid Start:** Qualified Solid Start representatives will call Veterans three times in their first year of separation to walk them through the benefits available to them.
 - **Veteran Training:** This online self-help portal provides tools for overcoming everyday challenges. These tools can help Veterans work on problem-solving skills, manage anger, develop parenting skills, and more.