



Dispelling the Myths about Suicide

Suicide is the act of deliberately taking one's own life and is a worldwide public health problem. Suicide is the 10th most prevalent cause of death in the United States. Rates of suicide in the military have traditionally been lower than the national average once adjusted for demographics, but that gap has been closing in recent years. There are several factors that are thought to contribute to these higher rates including exposure to combat and the impact of other job related stressors that affect relationships in military families. The good news is that the overwhelming majority of military personnel who face these challenges are able to find effective ways of coping. However, there is a percentage of service members who struggle with these and other issues and yet are reluctant to seek professional care due to myths about suicide and mental health. The following information challenges some of the common myths about suicide.

MYTH: "SUICIDE IS AN EPIDEMIC WITHIN THE MILITARY"

Fact: When adjusting for demographic differences between the general U.S. population and that of the armed forces – particularly age, gender and race – the military suicide rate has historically been **lower** than the national average. Over the past few years the suicide rate for the military has increased, largely due to a sharp rise in suicides in the Army and Marine Corps. Despite this increase, suicide is still a very rare event in the services. Even in the worst year for suicides since the most recent wars began, less than 1/10th of one percent of service members died by suicide. This means that the vast majority of military men and women find successful ways to cope with relationship problems, legal and financial difficulties, and disorders like posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression, without taking their own lives.

MYTH: "PEOPLE WHO TALK ABOUT SUICIDE AREN'T SERIOUS, THEY WON'T ACTUALLY ATTEMPT SUICIDE"

Fact: Studies show that nearly 80 percent of those who die by suicide gave some warning about what they planned to do. People who are thinking about suicide will often give clues to what they are considering by frequently talking about death, the afterlife and by saying goodbyes to friends or family. Statements like "Everyone would be better off if I weren't around," or "I just can't keep going on with this," should be taken seriously.

MYTH: "SOMEONE HAS TO BE REALLY 'CRAZY' TO THINK ABOUT SUICIDE"

Fact: Actually, depression is a common psychological health condition. Thinking about suicide is one of the symptoms of depression – just like changes in appetite and having low energy levels. When a person is deeply depressed or very overwhelmed by too much stress or some sudden loss (death of a spouse or child), they may think about suicide. You should keep in mind that there is no "type" of person that attempts or completes suicide. If a fellow service member tells you they are thinking about suicide, act immediately to get that person help, even if you think they aren't the "type" who would act on it!

MYTH: "SUICIDE ONLY HURTS THE PERSON, NOT OTHER PEOPLE"

Fact: It is estimated that for each completed suicide there are six survivors profoundly affected by the death. Individuals who die by suicide not only harm themselves, but also hurt their friends and family members and, in turn, put them at risk for other negative consequences. When they die by suicide, a person actually raises the risk of suicide for their family members. People with a family history of suicide are themselves approximately two and a half times more likely to die by suicide.



MYTH: “I CAN’T DO ANYTHING IF SOMEONE IS SUICIDAL – I’M NOT AN EXPERT IN THIS”

Fact: Preventing suicide is the responsibility of every service member. You do not need to be an expert in psychological health in order to recognize when a buddy is having a hard time and to show concern for them. You can recognize some of the warning signs that people show and be brave enough to get involved and ask the hard questions.

MYTH: “ASKING SOMEONE IF THEY ARE THINKING ABOUT SUICIDE CAN PUT THE IDEA IN THEIR HEAD”

Fact: This is a dangerous myth because it prevents people from asking fellow service members about what they are experiencing. There is no evidence to suggest that asking someone if they are having thoughts about hurting themselves causes suicide. When asking about this, be direct – for example, ask “Are you thinking about killing yourself?” or “Are things so bad that you’re considering suicide?” Remember, if you never ask, there is no way to intervene and get the person help. Even if they aren’t thinking about it, they will know you are concerned about them and what they are going through.

MYTH: “SEEKING HELP FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH CONDITIONS WILL PUT A PERSON’S CAREER IN JEOPARDY”

Fact: Many service members worry that getting help for something like depression or relationship problems will harm their careers. Because they put off getting help – or even worse, don’t get help at all – the issues can grow into a greater problem. After someone’s depression or other problems grow out of control, they may feel so overwhelmed that they consider suicide. Issues like depression or marriage problems rarely lead to career problems, if handled proactively.



Photo Credit: U.S. Air Force photo by Airmen 1st Class Alessandra Hurley

MYTH: “SUICIDAL FEELINGS NEVER GO AWAY”

Fact: People may experience suicidal thoughts during times of crisis, when they are feeling overwhelmed and hopeless. Usually, once the crisis resolves, the thoughts about suicide go away naturally. Depression and feelings of hopelessness can go away even faster with psychological health care.

If you are experiencing suicidal ideation, seek immediate help from a medical provider. If a buddy or loved one is thinking about suicide and has shared this with you, do not keep it a secret, immediately escort them to a medical provider.

For confidential support, call the Veterans Crisis Line 24/7 at 800-273-8255 or visit veteranscrisisline.net to chat online.

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