

**Study:** Developing public messaging strategies to facilitate help seeking among Veterans at risk for suicide

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## **Bottom Line**

Veterans indicated that public health campaigns can be effective interventions during periods of crisis. Our findings highlight opportunities to inform campaign development targeting Veterans at high risk for suicide.

# **Research Questions**

1. How do Veterans at high risk for suicide understand and interpret suicide prevention messages?

2. What types of messages influence the likelihood for help seeking during periods of crisis?



#### **Linking Research to Practice**

Main point of messages was discernible; however, actionable steps (crisis line use) were not clearly communicated, potentially preventing messages from increasing help seeking behaviors. Keep Messages Simple. Consider the capacity for those in distress to take action. Provide clear direction for (or depictions of) targeted behavior change to help overcome potential processing issues during crisis.

**One size does not fit all.** Apply

Participants did not regularly perceive themselves as targets for messages despite content developed towards populations at high risk for suicide.

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Powerful solemn features paralleled how emotional crisis felt for participants, which increased their likelihood to attend to and positively respond to messages. more nuanced approaches that include messaging tailored to specific characteristics vs. ambiguous audience.

Consider the potential need for novel, emotionally intense stimuli to better connect Veterans in distress to message content.

Cultural competence is a must. Veterans didn't recognize firearm access as a risk factor for suicide.

Frame messages as somber and provocative to initally draw audience attention, but transition content to a more positive emotional appeal to motivate help seeking (i.e. benefits of treatment).

**Test, Test, Test.** Obtain stakeholder feedback throughout the design process to ensure messages functionally match the communication needs of Veterans at risk for suicide.

### **What Veterans Said**

I think one thing that could be helpful is to put the number constantly on the screen so that way if somebody is thinking about calling, then they have a chance to pick up, walk away, grab a pen, come back and write it down, because it is very short at the end.

Yes, I'm feeling suicidal,



It only connects to like I want to be there, and I can't be there...reminding me that's what I don't have. That's not where I am. but this guy has a total better - I would start judging - This guys has a total better reason for feeling suicidal. I'm just this person with this other trauma.

You can relate to it [AFN Pacific PSA], especially in the beginning how it's dark and isolated, and when you're in that moment, that's almost exactly how you feel.

You brought me the message. Okay, I see. I can see those people in pain. Now what? The [AFN Pacific PSA] made me feel every story that guys were telling me in them circles [at the VA]. I could hear the Dain in their voices.

## **Study Limitations**

Study findings are subject to limitations commonly associated with qualitative research (i.e. limited generalizability, sample/response biases); future research has been proposed to test the effects of messaging on targeted behavior change.

Thirty seconds can make a big difference, but it's got to capture you. And when you're in that state of mind it's not easy to capture that brain because that brain is about 99% focused on the problem.