

Providing Support for Suicide Survivors: Understanding Pertinent Military/Veteran Issues

Ryan E. Breshears, Ph.D., Nazanin H. Bahraini, Ph.D.,
& Lisa A. Brenner, Ph.D., ABPP

VA VISN 19 Mental Illness Research,
Education and Clinical Center



AFSP Support Groups

Veterans Twice as Likely to Die by Suicide

- Some risk factors are known
 - Gender
 - Education
 - Activity Limitations
- However, are these risk factors alone sufficient to assist clinicians in assessing risk?

Pertinent Factors

- Psychiatric and/or Medical History
- Military History and Culture
 - Exposure to combat and/or trauma
 - Deployment

Psychiatric History

- High rates of depression and co-morbid psychiatric conditions, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and substance abuse disorders among veterans
 - (Sutker, Uddo, Brailey, Vasterling, & Errera, 1994)
 - (Waller, Lyons, & Costantini-Ferrando, 1999; Zivin et al., 2007)
- Prevalence of significant depressive symptoms among veterans has been estimated as 2 to 5 times that of the civilian population
 - (Hankin, Spiro, Miller, & Kazis, 1999)
- One-third of Operation Iraqi Freedom Soldiers sought mental health services during their 1st year post-deployment
 - (Hoge et al., 2006)
- Estimated prevalence rates of PTSD and depression in recent or active duty service members are 5 to 10 percent and 2 to 10 percent, respectively
 - (Rand Report, 2008)

Medical History

- Veterans possess high comorbidity rates of psychiatric and medical conditions
 - PTSD and circulatory, digestive, musculoskeletal, endocrine-nutritional-metabolic, nervous system, respiratory, & non-sexually transmitted infectious disease
(Boscarino, 1997)
 - Traumatic brain injury (TBI) and chronic pain
(Nampiarampril, 2008)
- TBI is frequently discussed as a "signature wound" of the current conflicts
(Warden 2006)

Military and Culture

- Feelings of isolation, disconnectedness, and perceived ineffectiveness are emotions that can underlie suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Joiner, 2005)
 - Camaraderie of military personnel related to shared experiences (Brenner et al., 2008)
 - Further solidified if shared deployment-related experiences were distressing
 - No longer being deployed or actively involved in military culture may lead to feelings of isolation, burdensomeness, and subsequent emotional distress
 - Can be exacerbated when trying to readjust to civilian life or if one is unable to reconcile personal combat experiences with civilian values
- (Brenner et al., 2008)

Areas for Consideration that May Impact the Grieving Process

- Guilt and Confusion Regarding Responsibility
- Anger and Blame
- Mixed Emotions and Confusion
- Vicarious Trauma

Discussing Suicide or Trauma

- Consider that active duty/veteran survivors may be experiencing issues around vicarious trauma or PTSD, which may make it particularly distressing and difficult to hear details or specifics of suicides that may be brought up by other group members
- Suggestions:
 - Smaller group size
 - Adherence to structure regarding the group format
 - Simple modifications (e.g., allowing an individual with PTSD to sit near to the closest exit) may increase comfort

