



# VFW Department of PA – Suicide Awareness and Prevention Training

Presented by: Jesse Olson,  
Department Surgeon



**“RECOGNIZE – RESPOND – SAVE A LIFE”**

# WHY SUICIDE AWARENESS MATTERS

- Suicide is one of the leading causes of death in the U.S.
  - Higher rates in Veterans
- Suicide is often **preventable** with timely support
- Frequently preceded by **warning signs**
- **Most people who die by suicide gave signals – they were just not recognized or acted on.**

# Veteran Suicide Statistics - PA

- In 2022 there were 231 reported veteran suicides in PA
  - Males accounted for 220-230
  - Females accounted for less than 10
  - By age
    - 18-34yo - 29
    - 35-54yo - 49
    - **55-74yo - 86 Highest Risk Group**
    - 75yo and over - 67 2nd Highest Risk Group
  - National Numbers and Percent attributed to PA Veterans
    - 18-34yo - 849 3.5% from PA
    - 35-54yo - 1670 2.9% from PA
    - 55-74yo - 2263 3.8% from PA
- 75yo and over - 1597 4.2% from PA

# Common Suicide Myths vs Facts

## Myths

- Talking about suicide puts the idea in someone's head
- Strong people don't get suicidal
- People who talk about it won't do it
- Suicidal people want to die

## Facts

- Asking can save a life
- Anyone can be at risk
- Many people who die by suicide talked about it first
- They usually want the pain to stop



# Warning Signs of Someone Contemplating Suicide

Signs and clues to look for when someone may be thinking about suicide.

# VERBAL SIGNS

- “I wish I wasn’t here
- “Everyone would be better off without me”
- “I’m tired of everything”
- “I won't be around much longer”
- “I’m such a burden”
- Talking about death and dying

# BEHAVIORAL SIGNS

- Suddenly giving away belongings
- Saying goodbye unexpectedly
- Withdrawing from others or hobbies
- Increased alcohol or drug use
- Reckless behavior
- Sudden calm after depression, suddenly happy

# EMOTIONAL SIGNS

- Hopelessness
- Rage or Anger
- Extreme Mood Swings
- Feeling like a burden
- Deep shame or guilt

# HIGH-RISK SITUATIONS

Risks of someone contemplating suicide often increase after high stress or traumatic events such as:

- Loss of a loved one
- Divorce or relationship breakup
- Job loss or financial crisis
- Legal trouble
- Serious illness
- Trauma, PTSD, MST
- Major life changes



# WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT SOMEONE MAY BE SUICIDAL

A 4 STEP ASSESSMENT PROCESS

## STEP 1 – ASK DIRECTLY

- DO NOT BE AFRAID TO ASK:
  - “Are you thinking about killing yourself?”
  - “Are you thinking about suicide?”
- This **does not** make it worse – it opens the door to help.

## STEP 2 - LISTEN

- Stay calm
  - Don't interrupt
  - Let them talk
  - Take them seriously
- Say
    - "I'm glad you told me"
    - "You are not alone"
    - "I care about you"

## STEP 3 – DON'TS

- ❖ Argue
- ❖ Minimize their feelings
- ❖ Give lectures
- ❖ Promise to keep it secret
- ❖ Try to be their therapist

### ❖ Never say:

- ❖ "Just think Positive"
- ❖ "Others have it worse"
- ❖ "You wouldn't really do that"
- ❖ "Man up, its not that bad"

## STEP 4 – ASSESS IMMEDIATE DANGER

- Ask:
  - “Do you have a plan?”
  - “Do you have access to a weapon, pills or a way to hurt yourself?”
  - “When do you intend to take action on your plan?”
- If the answer is YES, then there is an Immediate Danger, and this is an **EMERGENCY SITUATION**



# IF SOMEONE IS IN IMMEDIATE DANGER

I have determined that someone I know is in immediate danger of harming themselves, what do I do next?

# Actions during Immediate Danger

- Someone in Immediate Danger
  - Has a plan
  - Has a means
  - Says they are going to do it soon
- Take these actions:
  - Call 911 or
  - Call 988 (Suicide and Crisis Lifeline)
    - Veterans press 1 when calling
  - Stay with them, do not leave them alone
  - Remove weapons or pills if safe to do so



# SOMEONE SHOWING SIGNS BUT IS NOT IN IMMEDIATE DANGER

Someone I know is showing signs of suicide but is not actively planning to harm themselves, what should I do next?

# SOMEONE NOT IN IMMEDIATE DANGER

- Encourage them to seek professional help with VA or other Mental Health Counselors
- Ask:
  - “Can I help you find support”
- Help them contact resources
  - 988
  - Local Crisis Line
  - Doctor or Therapist
- Follow up with them later – Checking in Saves Lives

# WHAT IF THEY SAY “DON’T TELL ANYONE”?

- You can say:
  - “I care about you too much to keep this a secret, your life matters.”
- Keeping someone alive is more important than keeping a promise.

# HOW YOU CAN SAVE A LIFE

- You **do not** have to fix them, you just have to:
  - Notice the signs that someone may be struggling or suffering
  - Ask them if they have a plan and a means
  - Listen to them and take them seriously
  - Connect them to help and follow up with them after.


# RESOURCES

## VETERANS CRISIS LINE

- a 24-hour, confidential resource that connects veterans with a trained responder. Available to all veterans and those who support them, even if they are not registered with the VA or enrolled in VA healthcare.
- **Call 988 (or 1-800-273-8255)**
  - Press "1" for Veteran
  - Press "2" for Spanish
- **Text 838255**



 Dial 988 then Press 1

 Chat

or Text 838255

[How We Help](#)  [Signs of Crisis](#) [Resources and Support](#)  [About](#) 

# 24/7, confidential crisis support

for Veterans and their loved ones

— . . . —  
You don't have to be enrolled in VA benefits or health care to connect.

 Dial 988 then Press 1

 Chat online

 Text 838255



# RESOURCES (CONTINUED)

- Find treatment, the confidential and anonymous resource for persons seeking treatment for mental and substance use disorders in the United States and its territories. [www.findtreatment.gov](http://www.findtreatment.gov)

# RESOURCES (CONTINUED)

- National Resource Directory: The NRD connects service members, veterans, family members, and caregivers to vetted resources that support their recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegration or transition.
- **Nrd.gov**

# RESOURCES (CONTINUED)

- Your Primary Care Provider or any local VA Facility
- VA Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Online
  - [https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide\\_prevention/index.asp](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/index.asp)

## RESOURCES (CONTINUED)

- **Veteran's Self Check Quiz** – The Department of Veterans Affairs and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline have joined with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention to create the Veterans Self-Check Quiz. This is a safe, easy way to learn whether stress and depression might be affecting you.
- *Using this service is completely voluntary and confidential.*
- **<https://www.vetselfcheck.org/welcome.cfm>**

## RESOURCES (CONTINUED)

- PA VETConnect – Run by the PA Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA)
- Web resource with many resources available to veterans
- **<https://www.pa.gov/agencies/dmva/pennsylvania-veterans/programs-and-services/pa-vetconnect>**

## RESOURCES (CONTINUED)

- VFW Department of PA – Suicide Prevention and Awareness Facebook
  - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/4054484594826446>

SCAN THE QR CODE WITH  
YOUR SMART PHONE  
CAMERA AND FOLLOW THE  
LINK



## RESOURCES (CONTINUED)

- **Jesse Olson – Department Surgeon**
  - (706) 577-7293
  - [Vfw.pa.sva@gmail.com](mailto:Vfw.pa.sva@gmail.com)
- **David Brady – Department Chaplain**
  - (815) 861-5941
  - [chaplainbrady@comcast.net](mailto:chaplainbrady@comcast.net)