



A MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH AND INNOVATION COLLABORATIVE IN MILITARY, VETERAN AND FAMILY MENTAL HEALTH

Plain language summary

SUICIDE IN MILITARY AND VETERAN POPULATIONS: A VIEW ACROSS THE FIVE EYES NATIONS

THE ISSUE AND WHY IT MATTERS

Suicide and suicidality (including ideation, plans, and attempts) are important concerns within military and Veteran communities. These issues exact a heavy toll, inflicting devastating human costs profoundly affecting family members, friends, colleagues, and operational units. Scientists are currently studying the risk factors involved in going from thinking about suicide to actually attempting it, as these are important areas where intervention can help.

WHAT WE FOUND

Although anger is a powerful motivator for action in the face of threat and danger, when anger becomes a frequent, intense, and long-lasting pattern, it can lead to problematic anger and negatively impact an individual's life and those around them. Addressing problematic anger is essential for the well-being and successful readjustment of military service members and Veterans to civilian society.

WHAT WE FOUND

While numerous risk factors have been identified, it remains challenging to determine who will attempt suicide.

Risk indicators are traits found more often in groups where suicide occurs frequently, but they do not directly cause suicide. In military and Veteran groups, examples include being male, younger, or holding a lower rank. On the other hand, we know that some risk factors (listed below) are more linked to suicide and suicidality. Likewise, we also know that there are protective factors (listed below) linked to prevention.

Risk factors may include:

- Presence of mental or physical health problems.
- Cumulative trauma exposure (including military sexual trauma).
- Medical or involuntary discharge from the military.

Protective factors may include:

- Healthy social connections.
- Good leadership.
- Good physical health.
- Secure employment and housing.
- Personal resilience.

Most industrialized countries have suicide prevention programs in military and Veteran groups, either as part of a larger national strategy for mental health or on their own. A common link in the Five-Eyes nations is that military and Veteran mental health programs take a "whole community approach," by connecting their policies directly to their country's mental health and suicide prevention plan.

The Five Eyes Mental Health Research and Innovation Collaborative is composed of thought leaders from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and United States. These experts conduct research and provide advice to governments on mental health issues. Our shared goal is to improve mental health outcomes for past and present military personnel and their families.

NEXT STEPS?

The key challenge in suicide is that of prevention.

Prevention strategies during military service should include:

- Early identification of mental health problems and suicidality, starting from enlistment, with interventions throughout the career lifecycle to reduce potential risks.
- Easy access to evidence-based personalized care.
- Reducing stigma and other barriers to help-seeking.
- Education for individuals, peers, leaders, families, and communities.
- Leadership training to support mental health and team cohesion.
- Support following a suicide, including sensitivity to the risk of suicide clusters within teams due to similar stressors or adversities.

Prevention strategies after military service:

- Providing extra support during and after the transition from military to civilian life.
- Considering the specific circumstances and environments Veterans are transitioning into is crucial.
- Strengthening support systems for families and equipping them with the knowledge and skills to aid in successful transition.

Despite decades of investigation, understanding of the causes, prediction, and prevention of suicide among military personnel and Veterans is still limited. There is a need for comprehensive research that spans from pre-enlistment through service and into post-service years. Strengthened by international group effort, research should focus on identifying pathways and root causes of suicidal behaviour rather than lists of indicators and risk factors. While suicide presents a significant challenge within military and Veteran communities, effective prevention strategies hold broader impact for society as a whole. Suicide prevention requires commitment from top leadership to ongoing enhancement through research and implementation of evolving best practices.

This is a plain language summary of *Suicide in Military and Veteran Populations: A View Across the Five Eyes Nations*.

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