



Responding to Suicidal Ideation and Suicide for Service Members, Veterans, and Their Families

A Prevention and Postvention Toolkit



Warning Signs for Suicide

Warning signs are observable indicators that a person may be thinking about suicide and may urgently need help.

SIGNS TO LOOKOUT FOR



Talking About

- Wanting to die or to kill oneself
- Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or obtaining a gun
- Feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
- Feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Being a burden to others

Behavior Change

- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Losing interest in activities
- Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly and irrationally
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings
- Sharp drop in performance
- Giving away possessions

ASK DIRECTLY



If you think someone may be thinking of suicide, ask directly. Asking the question "are you thinking of suicide?" can open the door to a conversation that may save a life.

LETHAL MEANS



Consider when to call for professional help or law enforcement. If firearms or other lethal means are present in the situation, connect to help ASAP.

HOW TO HELP: ABCDE & ACE



- A** Ask Directly
- B** Be an Active Listener
- C** Continue to Keep Them Safe
- D** Discuss Options and Connect to Help
- E** Encourage, Support, and Follow Up

Service members, veterans, and their families also use **ACE** when responding to risk of suicide.

- A** Assess and **ASK** if help is needed
- C** Offer **CARE** to stabilize and provide safety
- E** **ESCORT** to helping resource

GET HELP NOW



If someone is...

- Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself
- Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or obtaining a gun
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live

MENTAL HEALTH OR SUBSTANCE USE CRISIS?



CALL OR TEXT 988

988 | SUICIDE & CRISIS
LIFELINE

**For the Veterans Crisis Line,
Call 988 then Press 1, or Text 838255
CONFIDENTIAL AND AVAILABLE 24/7**

Safe and Secure Storage for Firearm Owners

Storing your firearms safely and securely can save lives. By storing your firearms, you can prevent your weapons from being stolen. You can also prevent your weapons from being accessed by loved ones at risk of suicide or violence against others.

Be SMART | Safely Store Your Firearms



- > Store and lock firearms **unloaded**
- > Store and lock ammunition **separately from firearms**
- > Make sure **keys/combinations are not accessible** to people in household in crisis (at risk for violence against self or others)
- > If someone is in crisis in the household, **temporarily remove firearms** from your home
- > **Avoid storing firearms unattended in vehicles** to prevent theft

LOCKING DEVICES



1

Cable Lock (Free-\$50)

Device that blocks chamber to prevent firing. Typically requires key or combination to unlock, usable on most firearms. Good to prevent children from access, but can usually be cut with bolt cutters/simple devices.

2

Trigger Lock (\$5-\$50)

Two-piece lock, fits over trigger guard. Blocks trigger but does not prevent loading. Typically requires key or combination to unlock. Should not be used on loaded firearm (can still be fired). Not usable on lever-action firearms.

LOCKING BOXES



1

Lock Box (\$25-\$350)

Small safe to store handguns/small firearms. Typically requires key, combination, or fingerprint to unlock. Lock boxes can be permanently mounted to prevent theft.

2

Safe (\$100-\$2,500)

Stores variety of firearms/other valuables. Typically requires key, combination, or biometrics to unlock. Most secure option for multiple firearms, and for theft prevention.

After a Loss - FAQ

Is there a right way to feel or react when someone in my service member, veteran and family (SMVF) community dies?

There's no "right" or "correct" way to feel. When someone passes away unexpectedly, there can be feelings of sadness, anger, confusion, shock, numbness, and more. The most important thing is to acknowledge your feelings. Dismissing your feelings can lead to deeper issues in the future.

Bear in mind that this loss might bring up difficult emotions or reminders of personal experiences even if you were not close with the person who died. If you are feeling stressed, seek support promptly. There are many community resources who can help, including doctors, religious leaders, and mental health professionals. You can also connect to 988. The Veterans Crisis Line can be reached by calling 988 then pressing 1, or texting 838255.

How can I learn more information about the person's death?

When something traumatic happens, it is normal to want more information about what happened and why. However, our community has a responsibility to respect the family who lost a loved one. The information shared with you is what the family is comfortable sharing. Rumors and speculation about why the person died can be really hurtful, especially for their family and their loved ones. We encourage you to focus on the person's life and memory and coping with the loss.

What are signs that someone may be struggling and may need more help?

After a loss in the community, some people may be at higher risk of crisis and suicide. Some signs indicate a person is at IMMEDIATE risk of suicide. If these signs are observed, do not leave the person unsupervised and immediately connect them to help:

- Talking about wanting to die or suicide
- Expressing hopelessness about the future
- Talking about being unbearably overwhelmed, feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Looking for ways or making plans to die, such as obtaining access to a gun or medications; researching suicide online

Other worrisome changes in behavior can be a sign that someone may be in distress and at risk of suicide. Refer individuals who display these signs to support:

- Changes in sleep (increased or decreased sleeping, difficulty falling asleep, etc.)
- Acting anxious or agitated, or behaving recklessly
- Dramatic changes in eating or appetite
- Showing hostility, rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Displaying extreme mood swings
- Engaging in non-suicidal self-injury
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Withdrawing or isolating self

How can I support my friends and family?

The loss of someone to suicide can affect the entire community. Supporting each other can make a significant difference in healing. It is normal to worry about saying the "right" or "perfect" thing after a loss. It is more important to keep some key principles in mind.

- **Be empathetic and kind.** Try to understand their reactions.
- **Be honest** when you don't have an answer to a question.
- **Reach out for support.** You can reach out to the list of resources accompanying this document. If you, or someone you know are in crisis and need support - please call, text, or chat 988 (National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline)
- **Be there for them.** Sometimes, just being there and listening is the most helpful thing you can do. If you don't know what to say, you can simply sit there with them.
- **Encourage memories.** Sharing positive memories about the person who died can be a comforting way to remember them.
- **Stay connected.** Keeping in touch with a simple message asking how they are can mean a lot
- **Help others.** Some find comfort in helping others or by getting involved in suicide prevention efforts. You may find respite in sharing your story, or in awareness events in your area.

How can I support the grieving family and friends?

It is important to respect the wishes of the loss survivors. If you are unsure of what their wishes are, and you are close to them, you can ask “How can I best support you right now?” to give them a chance to say what they need/want during this difficult time. It is also a normal response for them to not know what will be best.

Each person grieves differently; grief is a process and needs/wants change over time. It is important to create a non-judgmental safe space where each person can grieve in their own way. If the person you asked doesn't know what they need/want in those moments, you can offer to cook, clean, run errands, sit with them and talk, sit with them in silence, share resources like books, support groups, etc. Memorial service information may be shared when it is available, if they are open to the public to attend. You can offer to attend these memorialization services with the loss survivors.

Is there anything I should avoid saying/doing?

- Avoid using the phrase “commit suicide.” Instead say “died by suicide.”
- Avoid debating whether suicide is “right” or “wrong” or whether feelings are “good” or “bad.”
- Avoid lecturing on the value of life.
- Avoid acting shocked. This may put distance between you and the person you are trying to help.
- **Don't be sworn to secrecy, seek support.**
- Avoid offering superficial reassurance. Instead offer hope that alternatives are available.
- **Never dare them to act on suicidal feelings.**

What are some coping strategies I can use or recommend to others?

If you would like to do something to remember the person who died, there are many ways you can honor their memory. Ideas may include writing a personal note to the family, attending the memorial service, creating a memory book, or doing something kind for another person in honor of that friend. There are also some simple strategies that can help you feel better.

- Try some relaxation techniques
 - Take three deep, slow breaths
 - Count up to 10 and back down
 - Picture yourself in a favorite calm and relaxing place
- Engage in favorite activities or hobbies
- Exercise
 - Take a walk or hike in nature
 - Play a sport
 - Try a new physical activity
- Write a list of people you can turn to for support
- Write a list of things you are looking forward to
- Talk to others about how they have coped with difficulties in the past, and see if they have any new strategies for you to try
- Consider using Master Resilience Training (MRT) skills and techniques

How do I move forward?

Moving forward after a loss doesn't mean forgetting them; it means finding a way to carry their memory with you as you continue your life's journey.

- **Find a New Normal:** Try to find a new normal that includes the memory of the person you lost. Your experience of grief will likely not be linear; you might feel better some days and worse on other days. Lean on the supportive people and resources in your life.
- **Hold onto Hope:** Allow yourself to believe in the possibility of healing and happiness in the future. Your path may not be clear now, but each step forward is a step toward finding peace.

Experiencing a suicide loss is deeply painful, and it's normal to feel a range of emotions. Remember, it's important to talk about your feelings, seek support, and take care of yourself. By supporting each other, we can navigate through this difficult time together. If you or someone you know is struggling, don't hesitate to reach out to a trusted resource or person for help.

Resources are available. If you want assistance or support, please reach out.

National Resources

- Veterans/Military Crisis Line: Offers free, confidential support and counseling services 24/7. Call 988 and press 1, text 838255, or chat at [veteranscrisisline.net](https://www.veteranscrisisline.net)
- Real Warriors Campaign: Provides resources addressing various mental health challenges, including suicide prevention, at [health.mil](https://www.health.mil)
- Military OneSource: offers a wide range of resources and support services, including non-medical counseling, financial counseling, and legal assistance, at [militaryonesource.mil](https://www.militaryonesource.mil)
- Defense Suicide Prevention Office (DSPO): Provides resources, links, and policy information about to prevention resources for SMVF. [dspo.mil](https://www.dspo.mil)
- Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS): National nonprofit organization providing compassionate care and comprehensive resources for all those grieving the death of a military or veteran loved one. [taps.org/suicide](https://www.taps.org/suicide)
- Director of Psychological Health: Intervention-trained personnel who can guide service members to resources. [nationalguard.mil/News/Article/3381921/psychological-health-directors-discuss-readiness-impacts](https://www.nationalguard.mil/News/Article/3381921/psychological-health-directors-discuss-readiness-impacts)
- Worried About A Veteran: Resource with information on warning signs and a variety of practical guides for helping a loved one at risk of suicide. [worriedaboutaveteran.org](https://www.worriedaboutaveteran.org)
- Talking to Children Who Have Been Affected by Suicide or an Attempted Suicide of Someone They Know. [mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/docs/Together_We_Can_Talking_to_Children_CLEARED_508_12-19-19.pdf](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/docs/Together_We_Can_Talking_to_Children_CLEARED_508_12-19-19.pdf)
- Rocky Mountain MIRECC for Suicide Prevention - Talking to Kids (T2K) about Suicide. [mirecc.va.gov/visn19/talk2kids/schoolage.asp](https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/talk2kids/schoolage.asp)

Smartphone Applications

- Objective Zero: Connects users to peer support and curated resources. objectivezero.org
- PTSD Coach: Provides information and tools to handle symptoms, along with direct links to support for PTSD-related concerns: mobile.va.gov/app/ptsd-coach
- Suicide Safety Plan: Virtual place to store coping strategies and suicide prevention resources to use in the event of a suicidal crisis: suicidesafetyplan.app

Maryland Resources

- Maryland Department of Veterans and Military Families. veterans.maryland.gov
- Maryland National Guard. military.maryland.gov/NG/Pages/Suicide-Prevention-Program.aspx
- Traumatic Brain Injury Center of Excellence. health.mil/Military-Health-Topics/Centers-of-Excellence/Traumatic-Brain-Injury-Center-of-Excellence
- VA Maryland Health Care System. va.gov/maryland-health-care
- Chaplain Services: Our chaplains are trained to offer confidential counseling and support to service members and their families, regardless of religious affiliation. military.maryland.gov/NG/Pages/Chaplain.aspx
- Explore VA Health Care and Maryland Department of Veterans and Military Families locations near you. geodata.md.gov/veterans
- COMPACT Act. va.gov/maryland-health-care/programs/compact-act
- PACT Act. va.gov/resources/the-pact-act-and-your-va-benefits
- Maryland Department of Health, Behavioral Health Administration. health.maryland.gov/bha
- Maryland's Commitment to Veterans. health.maryland.gov/veterans
- Maryland Access Point. aging.maryland.gov/Pages/maryland-access-point

Maryland is fortunate to have a diverse system that provides support services across our state. Please refer to the [Military Connected Community Financial Resource List](#) for potential partners that offer financial assistance programs in Maryland. Specific eligibility criteria will vary.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

If you need support - please call, text, or chat online with 988 (National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) 988.maryland.gov





CONTRIBUTORS

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