

Suicide March 9, 2022

Suicide- a very dark subject. One which a lot of people feel extremely uncomfortable speaking about it. Just like in the 1950's, 60's, and 70's speaking about breast cancer, until First Lady Betty Ford brought it out in the open. Today, many lives are being saved because we talk about breast cancer. We have walking and running fund raisers that help with awareness, as well as pink t-shirts and the media talking about it.

We need to start making suicide apart of the conversation. We need to be talking about the "Signs". Knowing the "Five Signs" can help save the life of a friend or even a loved one. Veterans' families especially need to know the "Five Signs." Veterans and active-duty military still have extremely high rates of suicide in all age groups. Veterans struggle with the experiences they had while serving our country. Ageing veterans can be dealing with the loss of a spouse and/or health issues.

We all have triggers that can affect how we manage everyday stressors. Stressors such as the Afghanistan withdrawal. How this event was handled by our military and our government affected veterans of all wars. For Vietnam veterans it reminded them of the fall of Saigon. For all post 9-11 veterans they wonder what all the sacrifice was for. Families who lost loved ones are affected.

Another big stressor for many veterans is the holidays. Those veterans that are self-isolated are particularly vulnerable. Some dates or anniversaries of trauma are hard but if they fall during the holidays, it may become more than they can bear. We need to constantly check in on our "buddies" and if they need help get them the help they need. When the holidays are over, a lot of the support for Veterans is withdrawn or not as consistent because there is the belief that the high crisis time is over. On the contrary, when less support is provided the higher the probability of suicide. So be aware and check in on friends and family all the time.

I recently heard a Director of a VA hospital say we are down to 17 a day from 22 a day committing suicide. I did the math; 17 a day adds up to 6,205 a year! When we were losing 22 a day that added up to 8,030 a year. The numbers don't account for a veteran or active-duty comrade that drinks too much and then have an accident as a result. These are counted as accidental or due to alcohol. But what was the reason for drinking too much, depression, PTSD, TBI, MST? Drug over-dose is the same. What caused the end result does not get it counted as suicide. To put this in perspective we lost 7,000+ in-country in 20 years of fighting in the middle east. Better than half of all veterans who commit suicide have never been in the VA system. To me that means there is a lot of work to be done getting veterans connected to the programs that can help. We need to build more partnerships and strengthen those we have to serve the needs of our veterans and their families, for their physical wounds as well as their invisible wounds.

The National VFW, along with other service groups, and state Veteran agencies, all provide training and resources to Veterans Service Officers (VSO's) to help veterans directly create a road map and identify resources to give hope for the future. Programs such as Unmet Needs, employment training, and scholarships for education are just a few examples. Getting every veteran set up at the VA for evaluation of medical and psychological needs is critical. Along with these programs the VSO's can obtain benefits to help stabilize the veteran's finances and give each veteran time to seek support groups. Support can be found at Vet Centers, the VA, and other non-profit groups. Support might be found in another veteran, perhaps that older vet that has managed to make it through to a productive life.

One group of veterans that is often overlooked is our National Guard units. They only meet once a month. They are sent back home after deployment. Sometimes they got out after deployment and are entirely overlooked and fall through the cracks in the system. The VFW in each state needs to make sure our National Guard troops know about and understand what is out there for them. Their families need to know what is out

there for them. Too often both National Guard and Active-Duty military that wish to remain in the service do not want to ask for help as it is still a stigma, and they feel it will affect their ability to obtain promotions.

Many VFW Posts have already adopted National Guard units. Checking with the Commanding Officer, the 1st Sgt., as well as the family readiness person to make sure they are using the “Buddy System” can help save lives. The “Buddy System” is simply checking on and talking with those you served with. You were with them when they had good days and when things did not go so well. Talking, listening, and knowing the “Signs” can help.

So, getting back to lowering the number of suicides: It means making sure veterans, their family and friends understand the “Signs” and what to do if they see one or more of these signs is particularly important.

- 1) Thinking about hurting or killing themselves,
- 2) Looking for ways to kill themselves,
- 3) Talking about death, dying, or suicide,
- 4) Self-destructive behavior such as drug abuse, weapons, etc.,
- 5) Hopelessness, feeling like there is no way out,
- 6) Anxiety, agitation, sleeplessness, mood swings,
- 7) Feeling like there is no reason to live,
- 8) Rage or anger,
- 9) Engaging in risky activities without thinking,
- 10) Increasing alcohol and drug abuse,
- 11) Withdrawing from family and friends.

We have a National Crisis line 1-800-273-8255, or chat at [VeteransCrisisLine.net](https://www.veteranscrisisline.net), or text to 838255.

Put this number in your phone, NOW! I hope you never need it, but if you do need it, you have it.

Some states also have a “hot line.” We need to get these out and keep pushing them. Family and friends need to use the A.C.E. system:

- A Ask directly, “are you thinking about hurting yourself?”
- C Care – calmly control the situation. Listen and show concern. Talk to them and let them talk, **LISTEN**.
- E Escort- do not leave this veteran alone to take care of problems! Get help from a professional.
Remove all firearms or other things from this veteran which could be used to harm himself or herself.

These are but a few of the things to look for. Veterans are incredibly good at hiding emotions and saying everything is ok. They have learned to push through to complete the mission. It is when things become so overwhelming that we as friends and family need to help. It is critical to step in and provide the support and professional help necessary at this point.

I was asked, “What should we do?” This is a very good question and I put it back to you, what can we do? The VFW needs to be the “Betty Ford” for suicide. Let us make suicide a part of our regular conversation and bring it into the open so more people are aware of the Signs of Suicide and what to do if they notice these signs. This is the starting point we have been looking for. Let us be the “Betty Ford” of suicide. The VFW has a big stage, just like First Lady Betty Ford, we need to lead the way just like she led the way to talk about breast cancer and bring it out of the closet. “The Time is Now!”

A few years back the “#Change Mental Health” campaign was on the front-burner then it slipped aside with all the concerns of the Pandemic. Now Pandemic issues are easing, in some locations easing a lot. With all the problems that existed before the Pandemic we need to double-down because our efforts are needed more than ever with the current global events. Many veterans of all ages are struggling with what is happening in Afghanistan and Ukraine.

Besides the veterans and active-duty military, the civilian population and families of veterans are affected. The rate of teenage girls checking into emergency rooms suffering from mental health issues has gone up dramatically during the pandemic. A new revitalized mental health program could help the entire population and the VFW could be the reason it moves forward.

We can get involved, we can educate veterans and their families to know the “Signs.” You can host a ½ hour to a 1-hour seminar for the National Guard, vets & families to attend. “Understanding more about the risks of suicide among veterans of all ages”. Advertise it on social media, ask younger members to help with the advertising. At our VFW Post we can hand out the cards from the VA with the Five Signs and the Crisis Line information. We can offer to speak at different civic groups. Veterans are everywhere. Just saving ONE life is a huge accomplishment!

To make this consistent through-out the VFW, a program or outline would need to be developed with requirements for Posts, Districts, and Departments to achieve. One of our Priority Goals is to bring suicide to zero. Now we need to define how we are going to do this and re-dedicate ourselves to do this for our fellow veterans, guard, and active-duty military. At the same time, I believe the entire community will benefit. Just saving one life is an accomplishment.

Please call me or email me with your questions, ideas, or what has worked for you.

Thank you for all you do for our veterans.

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Resources

VFW Mental Wellness Campaign – vfw.org/assistance/mental-wellness
Give an Hour – giveanhour.org
The Campaign to Change Directions – changedirection.org
Patients Like Me – patientslikeme.com/join/vfw
One Mind – onemind.org
The Elizabeth Dole Foundation – elizabethdolefoundation.org
Help Heal Veterans (therapeutic craft kits) – healvets.org
Veterans Voices Writing Project – veteransvoices.org