

Military transition and suicide prevention: supporting veterans through change

Leaving military service is a profound life transition. For many veterans, it marks a shift from a highly structured and purpose-driven environment to the more complex and often ambiguous demands of civilian life. While this transition can be full of promise, it also comes with unique stressors that can increase the risk of emotional distress and suicide — particularly within the first year after separation, and especially in the first three to six months.

By recognizing the challenges veterans may face and building a strong network of support, we can foster resilience and reduce risk during this vulnerable period.

Why are veterans at greater risk?

Veterans may face several overlapping factors that increase suicide risk — most of which are tied to the challenges of reintegration and the impact of military experiences.

These include:



Adjustment stress

Returning to civilian life isn't a single event — it's an ongoing process. Veterans must adapt to a different pace of life, new expectations, and shifts in identity. They may have to:

- Reestablish family roles, reintegrate into new family structures, and potentially rebuild relationships.
- Navigate civilian employment, evolved education needs, and housing challenges
- Cope with physical injuries or emotional/psychological wounds from service

Veterans are likely to feel overwhelmed and isolated regardless of whether or not they experienced combat.



Mental health concerns

Many veterans experience depression, anxiety, substance use, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after service. These conditions, especially when undiagnosed or untreated, can elevate suicide risk and other dangers.

PTSD in particular can result from exposure to traumatic events during deployment. Veterans with PTSD may experience nightmares, emotional numbness, hypervigilance, or a constant sense of threat — making reintegration even more difficult.



Social and emotional isolation

The loss of military structure, camaraderie, and shared mission can lead to feelings of loneliness or loss of purpose. Veterans often struggle to find the same level of connection or meaning in civilian settings as they are inherently different from military dynamics.



Access to firearms and military identity

Veterans may maintain strong connections to their military identity, including habits like wearing parts of their uniform, collecting weapons, or immersing themselves in military-related media. While not intrinsically concerning, sudden or preoccupied behavior around these activities may indicate the veteran is experiencing high levels of emotional distress or a profound psychological struggle with reentry.



Stigma and barriers to care

It is common for veterans to avoid seeking help due to the stigma of seeking mental health support, distrust of the system, or difficulty navigating civilian healthcare services. These can be barriers to accessing potentially life-saving mental healthcare.

What can help veterans thrive?

Veterans bring incredible strengths — discipline, leadership, dedication, resilience, and problem-solving. With the right support, the post-military chapter can be one of growth, healing, and healthy reintegration into civilian life.

Here's what makes a difference:



Patience and understanding

Recognize that reintegration takes time. Give returning veterans time and space to adjust, and validate the complexity of their experience. Encourage open conversation, and offer steady, nonjudgmental support.



Watching for warning signs

Be mindful of shifts in behavior such as:

- Hyperfocus on weapons, military news, or memorabilia
- Withdrawal from loved ones, support systems, community, or leaving their home
- Changes in sleep, mood, or routine
- Visits to cemeteries or increased preoccupation with death

These can be signs that the veteran is struggling — and may need more support.



Promoting access to veteran-specific resources

Many effective programs exist to support veterans during transition, including peer-led support groups, peer mentorship, mental health services, job placement, and housing assistance. Helping veterans connect with these resources can ease their path forward.



Fostering connection and purpose

Belonging to a supportive community — especially one that honors and understands the military experience — can ease the transition, reduce isolation, and increase hope. Encourage involvement in veteran groups, service organizations, or meaningful volunteer opportunities.



A shared responsibility to support our veterans

Suicide prevention for veterans starts with compassionate awareness, timely support, and continued commitment. Whether you're a loved one, clinician, or member of the community, you have a role to play in helping veterans feel seen, valued, and connected.

If you or someone you know is a veteran in crisis, help is always available

- Veterans Crisis Line: Call 988 and press 1, or text 838255
- VA Mental Health Resources: www.mentalhealth.va.gov
- Wounded Warrior Project: www.woundedwarriorproject.org
- National Resource Directory: nrd.gov – for vetted resources on employment, housing, and health

Information adapted from resources provided: VA.gov