

# Death and Dying Issues Among Service Members and Veterans

Death and dying are inevitable aspects of human life, yet they are subjects often veiled in silence and discomfort. Among service members, veterans, and retirees, these issues take on additional layers of complexity due to the unique experiences and challenges faced by these populations.

Service members are frequently exposed to life-threatening situations, making death a constant companion. The high-risk nature of their duties can lead to physical injuries and psychological trauma, potentially increasing their susceptibility to mental health issues such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These mental health conditions can contribute to higher rates of suicide, a devastating issue that is significantly prevalent amongst active duty personnel and veterans<sup>1</sup>. In addition to these concerns, veterans and retirees often face difficulties transitioning back into civilian life. They may struggle with feelings of isolation, guilt, or survivor's remorse, especially if they've lost comrades during service. The civilian population's lack of understanding or empathy can further exacerbate these feelings, leading to a sense of alienation and increased risk of self-harm<sup>2</sup>. The healthcare needs of aging veterans and retirees also present significant challenges. Many suffer from service-related health issues, such as exposure to harmful substances or combat-related injuries, leading to chronic illnesses and a higher likelihood of facing end-of-life care decisions earlier than their civilian counterparts.

Despite these challenges, resources are available to support service members, veterans, and retirees. The Department of Veterans Affairs offers various services, including mental health services, bereavement counseling, and end-of-life care. Non-profit organizations also provide support in various forms, from peer support networks to specialized therapy programs.

Addressing death and dying issues among service members, veterans, and retirees requires a multi-faceted approach. It necessitates raising awareness about these issues, improving access to mental health services, and fostering a culture of compassion and understanding. As a society, we owe it to our service members to provide them with the care and support they need during these challenging times. Below are some key resources that provide support during these challenging times. These resources aim to alleviate the difficulties faced by service members and veterans concerning death and dying. They offer much-needed support during these challenging times and ensure that those who have served our country receive the care and respect they deserve.

**Counseling Services:** Military OneSource offers various forms of counseling sessions, including face-to-face, phone, online, or video options. These services are designed to provide support to those dealing with the death of a loved one.

**Death Reporting:** The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has guidelines on reporting a veteran's death, including providing a death certificate or other public record of the veteran's death. Similarly, the Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS) has procedures for reporting a military retiree's death.

**Survivor Benefits:** The VA provides death benefits to veterans' survivors who meet certain eligibility criteria. The Office of Personnel Management also benefits survivors of retirees or persons receiving benefits from them.

**Burial and Survivor Honors:** The U.S. government provides military burial and survivor benefits and honors for active duty, veterans, and retirees. This includes burial in a national cemetery.

## **Suicide Rates amongst Women Service Members and Veterans**

Suicide among veterans is a heartbreaking reality. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, an average of 20 veterans take their own lives each day. This figure has been steadily increasing over the past decade, and it's estimated that more than 6,000 veterans will die by suicide in 2020 alone.

The statistics about veterans and suicide are concerning. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, veterans take their own lives at a rate 1.5 times higher than non-veterans. This heartbreaking statistic reflects veterans' difficulties in transitioning back into civilian life after military service and the lack of access to mental health care services they receive when needed most.

Veterans face unique pressures that can increase the risk of suicide. These include difficulty transitioning from the military lifestyle to civilian life, feeling disconnected from others after leaving the service, survivors' remorse, guilt, and dealing with high stress levels due to combat-related trauma or sexual assault experienced during deployment. Additionally, many veterans struggle with physical disabilities due to their service, which can contribute greatly to feelings of hopelessness and despair.

The issue of suicide among female service members and veterans is a matter of grave concern, with statistics showing a worrying trend. The suicide rate for female veterans has soared 85 percent in recent years, outpacing that of male veterans. A study indicated that suicide rates among military veterans are higher and have been increasing more quickly than those for non-veterans. In 2015, firearms were used by 39.9 percent of women Veterans who died by suicide, compared with 30.7 percent of U.S. non-veteran women who died by suicide.

The reasons behind these alarming rates are multifaceted. Women in the military are frequently exposed to traumatic events, leading to higher rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other mental health issues than their civilian counterparts. These conditions often result in lifetime suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, with 47.9% and 17.7% of women veterans reporting these experiences. Upon transitioning to civilian life, many female veterans struggle with feelings of isolation and a lack of understanding from society. The unique experiences and traumas faced during service can lead to difficulties in reintegrating into civilian life and forming connections with others. This sense of alienation can exacerbate mental health issues and increase the risk of suicide.

In response to this crisis, the U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs are implementing various initiatives to prevent suicide among veterans. One approach is to enhance mental health services and provide targeted support for female veterans, acknowledging their unique needs and experiences.

The issue of suicide among female service members and veterans is a complex challenge that requires a multifaceted solution. Addressing this problem involves raising awareness about the unique challenges faced by these women, improving access to mental health services, and fostering a culture of empathy and understanding.

Programs designed to promote community engagement and connection, such as veteran support groups, are essential in building a sense of belonging, which can help protect against suicidal ideation.

The VA has recently taken steps to address this issue, such as providing more mental health resources for veterans and increasing access to crisis hotlines. However, more can still be done. It is important that we continue to raise awareness about the issue of veteran suicide and make sure that our veterans are receiving the help they need. We owe it to them for their service and sacrifice. If you or someone you know struggles with suicidal thoughts, please seek help.

Veterans crisis <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net>

<https://www.va.gov/health-care/health-needs-conditions/mental-health/suicide-prevention/>

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline provides 24/7 confidential support at 1-800-273-8255 or through its website at [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org).

Additionally, local resources such as community mental health centers may provide access to specialized services for veterans. Together, we can help make sure our heroes get the care they deserve and can lead meaningful lives free from despair and suicide.

#### References:

Department of Veterans Affairs. (2020). Suicide Prevention. Retrieved from [https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide\\_prevention/index.asp](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/index.asp)

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. (n.d.). Get Help Now: 24/7 Hotlines & Online Chatrooms to Receive Support. Retrieved from <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/gethelpnow/index.aspx>

Department of Defense Annual Suicide Report (2020) [↵](#)

Journal of Clinical Psychology: "Understanding the impact of combat deployment on veteran suicidality" (2019) [↵](#)