

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Testing the Main Hypotheses of the Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicidal Behavior in a Large Diverse Sample of United States Military Personnel

Anestis, M.D., Khazem, L. R., Mohn, R. S., & Green, B. A. (2015). Testing the main hypotheses of the interpersonal–psychological theory of suicidal behavior in a large diverse sample of United States military personnel. *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 60, 78-85. doi:10.1016/j.comppsy.2015.03.006

SUMMARY: Sense of belonging may impact an individual's mental health and risk to engage in suicidal behavior. Utilizing a theoretical framework to assess suicidality, this study examined factors that may be contributing to an individual's desire for death and ability to engage in suicide attempts. Findings revealed that Service members who perceived a lack of belongingness in one's family and community were more likely to engage in suicidal behaviors in their lifetime.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Suicide desire and active suicidal ideation was present among participants with both perceived feelings of burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness.
- Service members who indicated an acquired capability of suicide were more likely to have suicidal desire; leading to more suicide attempts in their lifetime.
- Depression and hopelessness were not significant factors in contributing to a participant's lifetime number of suicide attempts, suicidal ideation, or resolved plans and preparations for suicide.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support groups for Service members and their families that create a sense of belonging, especially during the reintegration back into family and civilian life
- Educate professionals on recognizing the signs of suicidal ideation to decrease suicide attempts among individuals and families
- Provide additional supportive services to individuals and families to promote hope and well-being

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend that families and Service members are offered continual consultations with mental health professionals, especially during the various transitions in military life
- Encourage further research to examine effective strategies to promote belonging, hope, and well-being in individuals and families
- Recommend Service members and their families engage in building communication skills in order to better adjust to the reintegration back into family and civilian life

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METHODS

- Service members were recruited from a large Joint Forces Training Center in a southern U.S. state.
- Questionnaires were completed assessing participants' levels of perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and hopelessness, acquired capability of suicide, depressive symptoms, number of lifetime suicide attempts, and current resolved plans or preparations for suicide.
- Statistical analyses were used to assess what factors contributed to suicidal ideation, resolved plans and preparations for suicide, and lifetime number of suicide attempts.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample consisted of 934 Service members with 785 (84%) being affiliated with the Army National Guard, and 562 (60.1%) previously deployed; mean age was 27 years.
- A majority of participants were male (77.7%) and identified as White (57.5%) followed by Black (24.3%), Latino (4.1%), and other (6.4%).
- Half (53.3%) of the sample had never been married, 27.6% married, 6.4% divorced, and 0.3% widowed and/or not remarried.

LIMITATIONS

- It was unclear as to what other military branches Service members came from other than the National Guard, thus it is difficult to fully apply the study findings to Service members of other branches.
- Many of the measures that were used in this study lacked prior use in a military sample, which limits the ability to generalize to other Service members.
- The study findings may be limited in reliability due to the sensitivity of reporting any type of mental health issues, such as suicidal ideation.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Utilize samples with all branches of military personnel to determine how burdensomeness and thwarted belongings may differ from that of Active Duty personnel
- Replicate this study to assess suicidal behaviors across time, especially during military-related transitions such as reintegration back into family life and civilian life
- Conduct semi-structured interviews with individuals and families on suicidal behaviors with a trained professional

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