

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Non-Suicidal Self-Injury and Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors: A Study of the Explanatory Roles of the Interpersonal Theory Variables Among Military Service Members and Veterans

Chu, C., Nock, M. K., Hom, M. A., Stanley, I. A., Gai, A. R., Gutierrez, P. M., & Joiner, T. E. (2018). Non-suicidal self-injury and suicidal thoughts and behaviors: A study of the explanatory roles of the Interpersonal Theory variables among military Service members and Veterans. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 86*(1), 56-68. doi:10.1037/ccp0000262

SUMMARY: Often an individual has engaged in non-suicidal self-injury prior to a suicide attempt. In this study, the relationship between non-suicidal self-injury and suicide was assessed by examining the following variables: thwarted belongingness (i.e., feelings that one does not belong in a given group), perceived burdensomeness (i.e., the perception that one's death would improve conditions for others), and capability for suicide (i.e., lowered fear of death and repeated exposure to painful or traumatic events). Results indicated that interpersonal troubles can be associated with non-suicidal self-injury and can increase the risk of a suicide attempt.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Nineteen percent of Service members reported engaging in non-suicidal self-injury in their lifetime.
- Thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness were significantly associated with whether a Service member had attempted suicide when that Service member rated at high levels of capability for suicide.
- Service members who had a history of non-suicidal self-injury were more likely to have attempted suicide.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate Service members and their spouses about the possible increased risk of suicide in Service members who think they don't belong or that they are a burden to their families
- Offer workshops to Service members and their families to improve family cohesion and communication in an effort to improve belongingness
- Tailor efforts for suicide prevention toward Service members who have current or past non-suicidal self-injury

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote the development of programs that address non-suicidal self-injury and suicidality in Service members
- Integrate suicide prevention education into existing service delivery systems for military families
- Recommend training professionals who work with Service members to better be able to identify thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness

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METHODS

- The Military Suicide Research Consortium funded 24 studies, four of which were recruited at the following locations in the southern U.S.: 1) Veterans at a Veteran's Administration, 2) Army and Marine Active Duty at Marine Corps bases (also western U.S.), 3) Veterans and Reserve Service members at a university, and 4) Army and Air National Guard Service members at a National Guard camp
- The four studies included in this article differed in design and data collection approaches but utilized the same self-report questionnaires.
- The questionnaires utilized in these studies took components of larger, more extensive questionnaires; however, researchers ensured that they were representative of the topics being studied.

PARTICIPANTS

- Across all four studies, participants were 30 years old on average (SD = 11 years), 79% male, and races/ethnicities were White (64%), Black (19%), Latino (7%), Asian American (2%), Native American (1%), multiracial/other (13%), and unknown (1%).
- Total participants included 973 Active Duty, Reserve, and National Guard Service members (78%) and Veterans (22%). Service members were in the Army (74%), Marines (11%), Air Force (2%), Navy (2%), or unknown (11%).
- Across all four studies, 31% of participants were married, 48% single, 1% widowed, 19% divorced/separated, and 1% did not indicate their marital status.

LIMITATIONS

- Data were collected through self-report only, which could limit its validity since suicide is a sensitive subject that may tend to be underreported.
- Due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, risk trajectories and causality were not able to be established.
- Only a small percentage of the participants were asked about depression so the ability to control for it was incomplete; yet the areas where depression was controlled did sometimes change the results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Assess the onset, frequency, duration, and severity of both suicidal ideation and non-suicidal self-injury over time with Service members to better understand risk trajectories
- Consistently assess for depression in order to control for it in a more uniform manner across all participants
- Consider the interpersonal factors that might contribute to decreased belongingness and increased perceived burdensomeness

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