

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Military Veterans' Experiences With Suicidal Ideation: Implications for Intervention and Prevention

Denneson, L. M., Teo, A. R., Ganzini, L., Helmer, D. A., Bair, M. J., & Dobscha, S. K. (2015). Military veterans' experiences with suicidal ideation: Implications for intervention and prevention. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 45(4), 399-414.

SUMMARY: An in-depth analysis of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) Veteran's experiences with suicidal ideation was conducted. The study included 34 semi-structured interviews with OEF/OIF Veterans on what lead up to disclosure of suicidal ideation during clinical assessments. Overall there were found to be three overarching domains relevant to Veterans' experiences around suicidal ideation: military culture, difficult deployment experiences, and post-deployment adjustment challenges.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Veterans made implicit and explicit references to military culture throughout the interviews, yet each noted individual experiences within this culture.
- Within the post-deployment domain, four primary themes emerged: adjusting to civilian culture, changes to sense of self, feeling overwhelmed by stressors, and lacking purpose or meaning in life.
- Secondary themes present across the main themes were: struggles for control, discomfort with ambiguity, functional limitations, mental health issues, employment concerns, inadequate contributions to society, disrupted relationships, and devaluation of life.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer Service members post-deployment reintegration workshops on adjusting to civilian culture, coping with life stressors, rebuilding a sense of self, and developing a life purpose and meaning
- Provide post-deployment support groups for deployed Service members to process difficult deployment experiences (e.g., difficult duties, unit cohesion and leadership, and combat experiences)
- Disseminate information regarding possible symptoms of mental health problems Service members may face after deployment and where individuals can find help

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue support for suicide prevention efforts that are responsive and flexible in meeting Service members' unique experiences
- Build awareness across military branches around the importance of supporting and promoting mental health among returning Service members
- Encourage collaboration among DoD programs, the Veterans Affairs (VA), and community-based organizations to support Service members' reintegration needs

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METHODS

- Veterans who screened positive for depression or PTSD and endorsed suicidal ideation during brief risk assessments were recruited at three geographically diverse VA medical centers.
- Thirty-four Veterans were asked in semi-structured interviews about events or circumstances that led up to their disclosing suicidal ideation, prior suicide attempts, and prior experience with suicidal ideation and mental health care.
- Analysis included the research team independently reading each transcript, creating preliminary codes, discussing divergent coding, and establishing consensus on common themes.

PARTICIPANTS

- Thirty-one participants were male and three were female.
- Most participants identified as White (74%), while 15% identified as Black, 6% as Latino, and 6% as other.
- The average length of time that participants were in the military ranged from 3-30 years, with the average being 14 years.

LIMITATIONS

- Participants in this study had already accessed VA health care and endorsed suicidal ideation prior to participating in the interviews; which could have biased the findings.
- Veterans self-selected to participate in the study; therefore, findings could have biased towards those who were more comfortable discussing thoughts of suicide.
- The proportion of racial/ethnic minority and women veterans in the study was lower than the proportion of racial/ethnic minority and women veterans from OEF/OIF who received assessments during the same study period; therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution to these groups.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Further this study with a more diverse group (e.g., gender, race and ethnicity, rank) of Service members and their experiences with suicidal ideation
- Investigate in greater depth the themes of adjustment to civilian culture, coping with unexpected stressors, developing a sense of self, and life purpose and meaning
- Explore upstream prevention efforts, prior to a crisis or presentation of suicidal ideation

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