

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Exploring the Association Between Exposure to Suicide and Suicide Risk Among Military Service Members and Veterans

Hom, M. A., Stanley, I. H., Gutierrez, P. M., & Joiner, T. E. (2017). Exploring the association between exposure to suicide and suicide risk among military service members and veterans. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 207, 327-335.
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SUMMARY: Suicide has a profound impact on surviving family members and friends, although few research has examined this issue in the military population. By combining data from 15 independent studies, this study examined the association between exposure to suicide and suicide risk in Service members and Veterans. Results revealed an elevated risk of suicide in military personnel who have been bereaved by suicide.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Compared to participants who did not know someone who committed suicide, those who knew someone who committed suicide were more likely to report current suicidal symptoms and history of suicidal thoughts and behaviors.
- The closer a participant was to a person who committed suicide, the more likely that the person would have future suicidal attempt.
- Participants who reported greater negative impacts of suicide death on their lives were more likely to have current suicide ideation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer workshops to military families who had been exposed to suicide in order to reduce the negative effects of suicide exposure
- Provide support groups for Service members who were exposed to suicide so that they can help and support each other
- Disseminate information regarding suicidal symptoms and behaviors that Service members should watch for and professional institutions that may help

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Build awareness among military families around the importance of promoting positive coping in Service members
- Continue to support prevention efforts that meet military Service members' unique needs
- Support training for professionals who work with Service members so that they are aware of the relationship between suicide exposure and suicide risk

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METHODS

- Data for the study were aggregated from 15 independent studies with various recruitment methods (e.g., flyers, provider referrals, etc.).
- All participants completed the same battery of measurements, including suicide exposure and bereavement experience, suicidal symptoms, suicidal behaviors, thwarted belongingness, and history of non-suicidal self-injury.
- Data were analyzed to examine the association between exposure to suicide and suicide risk.

PARTICIPANTS

- A total of 1,753 Service members and Veterans were included in the study; the participants were mostly male (82%) with an average age of 33.44 years (age range = 18-88 years, SD = 13.38).
- Most participants were White (65%), followed by Black (20%) and others (3%); 12% of the participants declined to state their race/ethnicity.
- Participants' military branches were: Army (70%), Navy (13%), Marines (11%), Air Force (4%), and other (2%); the current military status (e.g., Active Duty or Reserve) and rank of the participants were not indicated.
- The majority of participants (57%) reported knowing someone who died from suicide.

LIMITATIONS

- The cross-sectional design of the study made it hard to examine the causal relationship between exposure to suicide and suicide risk.
- The degree of participants' exposure to suicide was not collected, therefore it was impossible to investigate if greater exposure were associated with more severe suicidal risk.
- Participants' military status and rank were not collected, therefore the potential effects of military status and rank on the association between exposure of suicide and suicide risk were unknown.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Collect longitudinal data to examine the causal relationship between exposure to suicide and suicide risk
- Study if age, gender, military status, and rank have any effect on the association between exposure of suicide and suicide risk
- Explore prevention methods that could decrease Service members' and Veterans' suicide risk after being exposed to suicide

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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