Confidential chat at VeteransCrisisLine.net or text to 838255

1 CONVERSATION opens the DOOR

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

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1 CONVERSATION shows you CARE

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

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1 SMALL ACT makes a DIFFERENCE
Preventing Veteran Suicide:
Lethal Means Safety Counseling in
the San Francisco VA Health Care System
Outline

• Suicide Risk among Veterans

• Importance of lethal means safety for Veterans

• San Francisco VA HCS’s Lethal Means Safety Counseling training for VA providers
21.9 million veterans

19.7 million (90% male, 10% female)

Race & Ethnicity

- White alone, not Hispanic or Latino: 17.2 million
- Black: 2.6 million
- Hispanic or Latino: 1.4 million
- Asian: 272,000
- American Indian or Alaska Native: 151,000
- Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander: 34,000

Service Era

- Vietnam Era: 35%
- Peacetime: 26%
- Post Sept 2001: 10%
- Gulf War: 13%
- Korean War: 10%
- WWII: 6%

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2014). VetPop 2011, Table 1L: Living Veterans by Age Group, Gender, 2010-2040 as of 9/30/2013; Table 2L: Living Veterans by Period of Service, Gender, 2010-2040 as of 9/30/2013; and Table 3L: Living Veterans by Race/Ethnicity, Gender, 2010-2040 as of 9/30/2013.
Veteran Suicides 2010 vs. 2014

Decrease in average number of Veteran suicides per day

22
2010

20
2014

Decrease in number of Veteran suicides as a percentage of all suicides among U.S. adults

22%
2010

18%
2014
Increase in Veteran Suicide Rates, 2001-2014

- U.S. VETERANS: Increase 32.2%
- VETERAN MALES: Increase 30.5%
- VETERAN FEMALES: Increase 85.2%
Suicide Risk Among Veterans

- Overall, almost all age groups of Veterans at elevated risk of suicide compared to age-matched civilians
Suicide Among Veterans in VA Care

• ~2/3% of Veteran suicides completed by firearm

• Among Veterans who completed suicide, VA medical records document:
  • 50% had chronic pain
  • 34% had access to an unsecured firearm


• 80% of non fatal self-injury events occur within 4 weeks following an outpatient visit www.va.gov/opa/docs/suicide-data-report-2012-final.pdf

• Need and opportunity for intervention by health care providers
Lethal Means Safety in Suicide Risk Assessment

- Age, Gender, Ethnicity
- History of suicide attempts
- History of trauma
- Family history of suicide
- LGBTQ identification
- Transgender & gender nonconforming identification
- Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)
- Chronic medical condition (especially pain)
- Psychiatric diagnosis (e.g., bipolar disorder, PTSD)
- Barriers to healthcare (including stigma)
- Substance use disorder
- Affective lability
- Loss of relationship or job
- Relapse
- Homelessness
- Financial difficulty
- Legal involvement
- Sleep disturbance
- Access to lethal means
- Anger, irritability, agitation
- Anxiety
- Burdensomeness
- Hopelessness
Lethal Means Safety Interventions

- Empirically supported suicide prevention strategy
  Mann et al. JAMA. 2005;294(16), 2064-74

- Examples of lethal means safety interventions:
  - Golden Gate Bridge Suicide Barrier
    www.ggbsuicidebarrier.org
  - Pill boxes, blister packaging
  - Nalaxone distribution
  - Gun locks and safes, storing ammunition separately, off-site gun storage
  - Lethal Means Safety Counseling
    - How to talk with at risk Veterans about lethal means safety options
VA Lethal Means Safety Project

- Promotes education and awareness about lethal means safety in VA
- Trains providers in Lethal Means Safety Counseling for Veterans:
  A collaborative conversation between a health care provider and an at risk Veteran that explores options for temporarily storing lethal means more safely (i.e., in a way that lowers suicide risk). The conversation emphasizes a Veteran’s autonomy, priorities, and values.
Veteran Access to Firearms
National Firearm Survey (NFS), 2015

% Firearm Ownership
45

Mean # of guns* 6.4
(range 1-140)

% who store at least one gun loaded & unlocked* 33

*among firearm owners
Perspectives on Gun Safety Counseling: IAVA Members

Should peers discuss gun safety with Veterans in crisis? 93%

Should mental health clinicians discuss gun safety with Veterans in crisis? 82%

2015 IAVA Membership Survey
More Veteran Perspectives on Gun Safety Counseling

• Several options to delay access to guns during high risk periods seen as acceptable

• Involving VSOs in temporary off-site storage options acceptable, but with significant caveats regarding logistics & gun return

• Most favorable stance towards gun locks and family education

• Veterans and their families agree that VA providers have a role to play in gun safety counseling

• Walters et al. 2012, General Hospital Psychiatry 34: 692–698
• Valenstein et al. HSR&D/QUERI National Conference, National Harbor, MD, July 19, 2012
VCL gun safety video: Simple actions help keep Veterans and their families safe

No one can un-fire a firearm.

For someone in crisis, a locked firearm can mean the difference between a tragic outcome and a life saved.

Watch an informational video and learn more at VeteransCrisisLine.net

VA Suicide Prevention Coordinators provide gun locks to secure firearms in the home

Confidential chat at VeteransCrisisLine.net or text to 838255
Show firearms safety video
veteranscrisisline.net/Resources/Videos.aspx
Access to Lethal Means Matters to VA Clinicians

• August 26, 2014 Executive Actions for DoD and VA

“Improving Patient Safety and Suicide Prevention”

“DoD will implement a policy to facilitate requests for at-risk service members or at-risk military family members to voluntarily secure their firearms. Additionally, VA will provide coaching and support regarding safety plans for suicide prevention, with a focus on increasing safety in the home, and work with Veterans Service Organizations and others to encourage friends or community groups to help improve firearm safety for Veterans in distress.”
Training VA Clinicians in Lethal Means Safety Counseling

- Clinicians play a key role in promoting lethal means safety to at risk patients.

- Little guidance from research literature about how to counsel Veterans about temporary safe storage of medications and firearms.

- How can we teach clinicians to counsel more effectively?
Training in Lethal Means Safety Counseling

• Goal: Train behavioral health and peer providers to educate and counsel Veterans at risk for suicide about safe storage of firearms and other lethal means.

• 2-hour, small group in-person training
• Didactic and experiential (role plays, “what do I say when…?”) components
• Pre- and post-training survey of providers’ self-reported lethal means safety counseling beliefs and behaviors
• Training evaluations indicate that providers value the training and are eager to learn more
Directing & Guiding Approaches

Directing
- You shouldn’t have access to so much medication during this crisis.
- You have a lot of reasons to reduce your access, such as your family.
- Don’t you want to be safer by using this gun lock and having your wife keep the key?

Guiding
- When you’re having suicidal thoughts, do you also think reasons to keep yourself safe?
- Is there anything that could happen that would cause you to want to store your medications more safely?
- What are your thoughts about having someone else store your guns temporarily?
- What other options would you be willing to consider to increase your safety? A gun safe? Gun locks?

Adapted from Peter Britton, PhD
VISN2 COE for Suicide Prevention
Lethal Means Safety Counseling Approaches

- Lethal Means Counseling approaches may vary based on
  - Relationship with Veteran
  - Knowledge about access to lethal means
  - Knowledge about and comfort with lethal means in question
  - Urgency of situation
  - Reason for access to lethal means in question
  - Opportunity for follow up
Themes: Lethal Means Safety Counseling

- Trust takes time
- Involvement of peers, family & friends
- Many options for safer storage
- If guns are stored off-site, concern about return of guns
- VA providers want to respect Veteran autonomy and values, affirm right to own guns
- Evaluation of training impact on clinician behaviors and Veterans’ storage practices is needed
- Effective Lethal Means Safety Counseling is always patient-centered!
Storage Options: Firearms

- Temporarily store guns away from home
- Store guns unloaded
- Store guns and ammunition separately
  (or store ammunition out of the home)
- Lock gun (cable or trigger lock)
  - Ask friend or family member to keep key
- Store gun in safe
  - Ask friend or family member to change combination
- Remove key component of gun

See National Shooting Sports Foundation or lokitup.org or for locking options.
Safety Hierarchy: Firearms

• Temporary off-site storage is the safest option

• Also safe: locking the firearm and...
  • Giving key to someone or storing key in a bank safe deposit box
  • Asking someone to change safe combination, or
  • Temporarily disable gun, e.g., giving a component of gun, such as firing pin, to someone

Brent & Bridge. American Behavioral Scientist. 2003;46(9): 1192-1210
A 28 year old, unmarried Iraq Army combat Veteran told his VA psychiatrist that a week earlier, following an argument with his girlfriend, he drove to an empty parking lot and sat with his loaded handgun in his lap, intending to kill himself. After about an hour, he returned the gun to his car’s locked glove box and drove home.

Veteran told his psychiatrist that since then, he has continued to feel distressed about his relationship with his girlfriend, which remained tense.
He also said that he has no current plan or intention to harm himself, and that he keeps the gun loaded and unlocked in his glove box for protection. He declined to speak further with the psychiatrist about his suicidal thoughts or safe storage of his gun.

Veteran is a longstanding member of a weekly VA therapy group for Veterans with PTSD. He trusts both his fellow group members and the group facilitator. One of his closest buddies is in the group. The group is scheduled to meet two days hence.
Lethal Means Safety Counseling Summary

• Lethal means safety is a crucial and often overlooked component of suicide risk assessment and management for Veterans.

• VHA and many Veterans want VA mental health providers to play a role in increasing lethal means safety for at risk Veterans.

• Lethal means safety counseling is a patient-centered intervention in development—it demands collaboration and a best-fit approach with each Veteran.
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Veterans Crisis Line
1-800-273-8255 PRESS 1
• Department of Veterans Affairs (VACO):
  Caitlin Thompson, Ph.D.
  Robert Bossarte, Ph.D.
  Janet Kemp, RN, Ph.D.

• San Francisco VA Health Care System:
  • Liz Karras, Ph.D.
  • Russell Lemle, Ph.D.
  • Mark Stalnaker, Ph.D.

• Means Matter:
  Deb Azrael, Ph.D.
  Matthew Miller, MD, MPH, Sc.D.
  Catherine Barber, MPA

• All U.S. Servicemen, Servicewomen, and Veterans
• For more information about the San Francisco VA Lethal Means Safety Project, contact Megan McCarthy, Ph.D., at 
  megan.mccarthy@va.gov

• For more information about the VA National Office of Suicide Prevention, contact

  Caitlin Thompson, Ph.D.
  National Mental Health Director
  Suicide Prevention and Community Engagement
  Department of Veterans Affairs
  Caitlin.thompson@va.gov

  or

  Megan McCarthy, Ph.D
  Deputy Director, Suicide Prevention
  Department of Veterans Affairs
  megan.mccarthy@va.gov
Resources

• Mental Health
  – VHA provides specialty inpatient and outpatient mental health services at its medical centers and community-based outpatient clinics. All mental health care provided by VHA supports recovery, striving to enable a person with mental health problems to live a meaningful life in their community and achieve full potential.
  – For more information on VA Mental Health Services visit www.mentalhealth.va.gov.

• Vet Centers
  – Vet Centers are VA community based centers that provide a range of counseling, outreach and referral services.
  – For more information about Vet Centers and to find the closest Vet Center to you visit www.vetcenter.va.gov.

• Coaching Into Care
  – A free, confidential “coaching” service provided by VA that helps Veterans’ family and friends to recognize when their Veteran needs support and connect them with local resources.
  – Call 888-823-7458 to reach a coach. To learn more about Coaching Into Care please visit http://www.mirecc.va.gov/coaching/services.asp.

• Community Provider Toolkit
  – VA’s Community Provider Toolkit offers Mini-Clinics, an online resource that enables clinicians to easily access information and tools for treating Veteran patients with various mental health conditions. These online “clinics” contain tools for assessing patients for these conditions, training clinicians to treat those patients, and educational handouts.
  – To access the Mini-Clinics and the useful resources they contain, visit http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/communityproviders/miniclinics.asp.
Resources

• PTSD
  – Each VA Medical Centers has PTSD specialists who provide treatment for Veterans with PTSD. For more information about PTSD and to locate the VA PTSD program nearest you visit www.ptsd.va.gov.

• Wounded Warrior Project
  – An organization dedicated to well-being and adjustment of wounded warriors in America, focused on raising awareness, helping injured Service members, and empowering a generation of Veterans.
  – To learn more about the Wounded Warrior project please visit http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/.

• National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
  – A grassroots mental health advocacy group with extensive educational materials, programs, and support for individuals and families affected by mental illness.
  – To learn more about NAMI or to find local support for a Veteran you are working with, please visit http://www.nami.org/.