be there.

VA Suicide Prevention Toolkit for Caregivers

January 2020

VA | U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

VA Caregiver Support

Support for Veterans. Support for You.

Dear Caregiver,

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) understands that caregivers are our partners in providing care to our nation's Veterans. We also know that it can be challenging to manage both the care of a Veteran and the everyday responsibilities of work and family. We are grateful for the role you play, and we are here to support to you.

We recognize that you are the hidden heroes at home, guiding our nation's Veterans through their journeys to healthy, fulfilling lives and helping them cope with both visible and invisible injuries. Invisible injuries, such as posttraumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury, can cause emotional distress, feelings of loneliness, and thoughts of suicide. These injuries may also be harder to recognize than visible injuries. As a caregiver to a Veteran, you may be the first to notice the signs of these invisible injuries. You may also be the first to notice any problems with alcohol or substance use.

The VA Suicide Prevention Toolkit for Caregivers includes important information about suicide prevention, as well as evidence-based mental health and substance use disorder treatments that can help Veterans recover and meet their goals. This toolkit also offers resources that anyone can access in the event of a crisis. Please visit **www.mentalhealth.va.gov/mentalhealth/about/index.asp** and **www.mentalhealth.va.gov/substance-abuse/treatment.asp** to read more about evidence-based treatments.

We also want to help you take care of yourself. Though you may be focused on caring for a Veteran, your own well-being is equally important. This toolkit equips you with information on self-care so that you can obtain additional support when you need it — helping you remain healthy and strong as you provide care.

The responsibility of caring for a Veteran does not have to be yours alone. The VA Caregiver Support Program provides support and services, including skill-building courses, peer mentoring, coaching, and other resources. A Caregiver Support Coordinator is available at every VA medical center throughout the nation to provide support to you in your role.

Mental health, treatment of substance use disorders, and suicide prevention are top priorities at VA. Ensuring that you have the resources you need to help the Veterans in your care while maintaining your own well-being is important to us.

We thank you for all you do every day, and we hope that these resources are helpful to you and the Veteran in your care.

Sincerely,

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The VA Suicide Prevention Toolkit for Caregivers of Veterans provides caregivers with information about suicide prevention, mental health, and substance use disorder treatment, as well as self-care resources. It also lists resources for Veterans and military families.

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Information for Caregivers About Veteran Suicide

Suicide prevention is VA's top clinical priority. Every death by suicide is a tragedy, and we will not relent in our efforts to connect Veterans who are experiencing an emotional or mental health crisis with lifesaving support. But VA realizes that no *one* organization, agency, or person can adequately support suicide prevention by itself. By involving Veterans' family members, peers, and communities, we can work together to reach Veterans *before* a crisis occurs.

VA knows that a caregiver to a Veteran is a keen observer of the Veteran's physical and mental health, and often a trusted confidant. That's why we want caregivers to have key information about suicide prevention, the warning signs for suicide risk, and where to get help when it is needed.

Our Approach to Suicide Prevention

VA's comprehensive approach to suicide prevention considers the many factors that contribute to risk for suicide and looks beyond the individual — to family members, caregivers, peers, and communities — for support in preventing it. We use the latest available research to develop evidence-based, multidisciplinary approaches to promote health, prevent disease, and help people lead longer lives. Evidence-based mental health and substance use disorder treatments focus on helping Veterans recover and meet their goals. To read more about these treatments, visit **www.mentalhealth.va.gov/mentalhealth/about/index.asp** and **www.mentalhealth.va.gov/substance-abuse/treatment.asp**.

VA's comprehensive approach is grounded in four key areas:

- **Preventing suicidal behavior**.
- **Offering whole health care**, which considers the patient's care preferences as well as factors beyond mental health, including physical health, spiritual health, alcohol or substance use services, and life events.
- **Using data and research** to tailor approaches to specific Veteran populations.
- **Collaborating with diverse communities** to empower their members to participate in suicide prevention efforts.

Role of Caregivers in Suicide Prevention

Caregivers play an important role in a Veteran's life — sometimes a lifesaving one. Whether you're the spouse, another family member, or a friend of a Veteran, you may be the first to recognize changes in mood and behavior, such as expressions of anger or emotional pain or increasing use of alcohol or drugs.

No matter your relationship with the Veteran, as a caregiver you have a vital role in supporting the Veteran and preventing a crisis. Here are some steps that can help:

- Learn about risk factors and how to recognize suicide warning signs.
- Watch the S.A.V.E. training video, which is designed to enable anyone to demonstrate care, support, and compassion when talking with a Veteran who could be at risk for suicide. (See the text box to the right for more information.)
- Attend medical appointments with the Veteran. Talk with their doctors to better understand their care needs and advocate to be involved in their care.
- Encourage the Veteran to pursue mental health treatment, including treatment of substance use disorders and — in this and other ways — help reduce the stigma they may associate with seeking treatment.
- Support adherence to medication and to treatment plans.
- Participate in the Veteran's safety planning and limit access to lethal means. Be familiar with the Veteran's safety plans so that you can reinforce coping strategies.
- Get involved in community-based suicide prevention efforts and support the Veteran's sense of connectedness in the community.

Take the S.A.V.E Course

PsychArmor's free, online 25-minute S.A.V.E. video was designed in partnership with VA to help viewers learn how to identify when a Veteran may be at risk for suicide and to empower them to play a vital role in suicide prevention.

Visit **www.psycharmor.org/courses/s-a-v-e**.

Caregivers Are Advocates

Caregivers are key members of the Veteran's care team. Maintaining communication with other health care providers is an important part of providing the Veteran the best care possible.

- **Attend appointments**
- **Ask questions**
- **Track medications**
- **Make lists and schedules**

Risk Factors and Protective Factors

Knowing about risk factors — and protective factors — is key to providing Veterans with support and preventing a crisis.

Veterans and non-Veteran adults share many important risk factors and protective factors when it comes to suicide.

- **Risk** factors are characteristics associated with an increased likelihood of suicidal behaviors. Risk factors for suicide include prior suicide attempts (the period immediately following a suicide attempt is one of high risk); certain mental health conditions or substance use disorders; access to lethal means, such as firearms or certain medications; and stressful life events, such as divorce, job loss, or the death of a loved one. For more information and support for family members coping with suicidality, read VA's resource guide: **www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/docs/ResourceGuideFamilyMembers.pdf**.

- **Protective** factors can help offset risk factors. These are characteristics associated with a decreased likelihood of suicidal behaviors. Factors that protect against suicide risk include access to mental health care, access to care for substance use disorders, feeling connected to others, adaptive spiritual functioning, and positive coping skills.

Veterans also have unique characteristics and experiences related to their military service that may increase their suicide risk or protect them against it:

- **Veteran risk factors** include transition-related challenges, posttraumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, and experience with firearms.
- **Veteran protective factors** include resilience, a sense of belonging and purpose through military service, access to VA mental health care and care for substance use disorders, and positive coping skills learned in high-stress settings.

To prevent Veteran suicide, we must work together to increase protective factors while decreasing risk factors in communities across the nation.

Warning Signs

Recognizing the warning signs for suicide risk and knowing how to respond to them are important. Ensure that you know how to recognize these warning signs:

- Hopelessness; feeling like there's no way out
- Anxiety, agitation, sleeplessness, or mood swings
- Feeling like there is no reason to live
- Rage or anger
- Engaging in risky activities without thinking
- Increasing alcohol or drug use
- Withdrawing from family members and friends

The presence of the following signs requires *immediate* attention:

- Thinking about hurting or killing oneself
- Looking for ways to kill oneself
- Talking about death, dying, or suicide
- Self-destructive behavior, such as problems with alcohol or drug use or carelessly handling weapons

In the event of a crisis, get immediate assistance.

Call **1-800-273-8255 and Press 1**, text to **838255**, or chat online at **VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat**.

Call 911 for emergency assistance.

Go to the nearest emergency room.

Find the VA resources nearest to you at **www.VeteransCrisisLine.net/Get-Help/Local-Resources**.

How Caregivers Can Support Veterans

From household chores to doctor visits, a caregiver's list of responsibilities may seem endless. However, taking a few extra steps with the Veteran you care for can be critical in preventing a crisis or keeping a crisis from escalating.

Create a Safety Plan

Veterans who are at risk for suicide or who have survived a suicide attempt should have a safety plan in place. As a caregiver, you can help the Veteran you care for create this plan. Working with the Veteran on a safety plan can help avert or mitigate crises, providing the Veteran with a list of coping strategies, sources of support, and resources they can turn to in times of distress.

The safety plan should be brief, easy to read, and written in the Veteran's own words. Safety plans should be easily accessible to the Veteran and select family members, friends, and caregivers at all times.

A safety plan should include six steps:

1. **Assess the warning signs** (listed above): "When should the safety plan be used?"
2. **Identify internal coping strategies**: "What can I do to take my mind off my problems without contacting another person?"
    - Take a walk or engage in some other form of exercise.
    - Develop a healthy hobby, such as dancing.
    - Journal your thoughts and feelings.
    - Relax with meditation or yoga.
    - Find peaceful focus through spirituality and prayer.
3. **Connect with people and go to public places that provide distraction**: "Are there people I can talk to or places I can go for a positive distraction from my suicidal thoughts?"
    - Go to the gym.
    - Visit a coffee shop.
    - Take a walk in the park.
    - Check on a friend or neighbor.
4. **Make a list of people who can be contacted for help**: "Who can I call, text, or visit to get emotional support?"
    - Call a trusted friend or family member.
    - Speak with a spiritual or religious adviser (priest, pastor, rabbi, imam).
5. **Make a list of professionals or agencies that can be called during a crisis**: "Do I have any health care providers, counselors, or other professionals I can call for help?"
    - Call a therapist.
    - Call the Veterans Crisis Line (1-800-273-8255 and Press 1).
    - Call a doctor's office.
6. **Make the environment safe**: "Is there anything I've thought of hurting myself with that should be removed or given to someone for safekeeping?"
    - Check the environment for unused medications that can be recycled or secured.
    - Secure firearms separate from ammunition.

- Give potentially self-harming object(s) to a trusted adult for safekeeping.
- Remove alcohol or other substances that may pose a risk.
- Post a completed safety plan where it is easy to find and share it with trusted family, friends, neighbors.

To learn more about the importance of creating a safety plan that is tailored to individual or family needs and can support Veterans and loved ones in the home who may be in crisis, download VA's "Fierce Loyalty" video at **www.veteranscrisisline.net/support/video-and-radio**.

To see how to create a safety plan, view **www.va.gov/ve/docs/outreachToolkitPreventingVeteranSuicideIsEveryonesBusiness.pdf**. VA's safety plan template and more information is available online at **https://starttheconversation.veteranscrisisline.net/media/1048/safety-plan-template.pdf**. You can also use the template in the **appendix**.

Practice Safe Firearm Storage

If you or the Veteran you care for owns a firearm, discussing ways to safely store firearms may help prevent a crisis or accidents in the home.

VA respects the important role firearms play in many Veterans' lives and is dedicated to educating Veterans and their families about safely storing firearms when not in use, in a way that is consistent with each Veteran's values and priorities. Practicing safe firearm storage is important for creating safer homes and preventing suicide.

Safely storing firearms when not in use (i.e., storing them locked and unloaded) puts **time and space** between an individual in distress and a firearm. Thoughts about suicide are often short-lived, and a safely stored firearm can buy you, or the person you're concerned about, time to get professional help.

It's a myth that somebody who really wants to die by suicide will find a way to do so. People who are suicidal generally do not seek other ways to attempt suicide if they do not have immediate access to the method they planned to use or if safeguards make using that method more difficult. For example, if someone in crisis plans to use a firearm to attempt suicide, they are not likely to try to use other methods if their firearm is safely stored or removed from the home.

Safe firearm storage practices involve using cable or trigger locks and making sure firearms are unloaded and secured when not in use, with ammunition stored separately. More information about firearm storage options can be found at the Project ChildSafe website of the National Shooting Sports Foundation: **www.projectchildsafe.org/**.

Veterans and their families, caregivers, and loved ones can also request a gun lock from any VA Suicide Prevention Coordinator (find your local SPC at **www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/local-resources**). In addition, the National Shooting Sports Foundation website (**www.nssf.org/safety**) can help you learn more about effective ways to safely secure firearms and find storage options that work best for you and your family.

It's never easy to discuss suicide, but it could save a life. Starting the conversation about safely handling and storing firearms could save a Veteran's life. Here are some key talking points to help you get

started: **http://starttheconversation.veteranscrisisline.net/pdf/talking-to-a-veteran-about-firearm-safety/**.

Safely Store and Dispose of Medications

Taking medications is part of a healthy life for some Veterans and their family members, but medications should be safely and securely stored when they are not in use. Caregivers can prevent intentional or unintentional overdoses by managing the Veteran's medication dosages and safely disposing of unused or expired medications.

VA facilities can provide safe means of medication disposal. More information can be found at: **www.pbm.va.gov/PBM/vacenterformedicationsafety/vacenterformedicationsafetyprescriptionsafety.asp**. To find other locations with receptacles for medication disposal, visit **https://apps2.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/pubdispsearch/spring/main?execution=e2s1** or VA's partner Walgreens, at **www.walgreens.com/topic/pharmacy/safe-medication-disposal.jsp?o=acs**.

Caregivers should ask a doctor or pharmacist about more options for safely storing medications or disposing of unused medications.

Naloxone Use for Opioid-Related Overdoses

Reduce harm and risk of life-threatening opioid-related overdoses and deaths among Veterans through opioid education and naloxone training.

VA is a leader in naloxone distribution to health care recipients and has documented more than 900 successful opioid overdose reversals.

Naloxone is an effective, safe, and easy-to-use medication that can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose. To learn how naloxone can save the life of your loved one, visit **www.pbm.va.gov/PBM/academicdetailingservice/Opioid_Overdose_Education_and_Naloxone_Distribution.asp**.

Substance Use Disorder Treatment

Substance use disorders (SUD) can have a major impact on the lives of Veterans and their families. While these conditions are relatively common, many people are not aware that they are associated with increased suicide risk. There are effective, evidence-based treatments that reduce the risk of suicide and premature death from all causes, including those related to SUD disorders. Effective SUD treatments available in VA include brief counseling; other behavioral treatment approaches; and medications for alcohol, tobacco, and opioid use disorders. Information on substance use disorder treatments can be found at **www.mentalhealth.va.gov/substance-abuse/treatment.asp**; **https://veterans.smokefree.gov/** also has specific resources to support Veterans during tobacco quit attempts (e.g., quit line, texts).

VA SUD treatment is tailored to individual needs and preferences, including assessment and treatment of common co-occurring conditions such as PTSD and depression. Caregivers can find locations for VA substance use disorder treatment at: **www.va.gov/directory/guide/sud.asp**.

Assist in Pain Management

Pain can affect sleep, mood, stress levels, and level of activity. Living with chronic pain can also increase the risk for suicide. Caregivers of Veterans experiencing pain can help the Veteran manage the pain and its related effects. Please visit **www.va.gov/PAINMANAGEMENT/Veteran_Public/index.asp** for tools, resources, and information on how to manage pain.

Caregivers can find additional information about pain management and resources for complementary therapies, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, and physical therapy at **www.va.gov/PAINMANAGEMENT/Veteran_Public/Complementary_Treatments.asp**.

Access Communities of Support

Caregivers of Veterans provide a support system and a sense of connection that reinforces safety and comfort by letting Veterans know that someone will ***Be There***. Research shows that Veterans with a strong support system tend to have more positive mental health outcomes, including lower rates of suicidal ideation.[1] Communities of support — whether these are in person (e.g., families, friends, and neighbors) or online (e.g., social media networks) — are critical to one's mental well-being.

Learn more about VA's programs below and in the resources section at the end of this toolkit, so you can help the Veteran you care for access support outside the home.

Peer Support

During military service, it's easy to find social support and develop unit cohesion, along with a sense of belonging, purpose, and connection. When a Veteran is back home, it may not be so easy to find peers who understand their background, military experiences, and how to reintegrate into the civilian community. Caregivers will be among the first to notice Veterans who are missing their peers and can help connect them with peer support.

One source of this support is the Peer Specialists at VA who work closely with Suicide Prevention Coordinators to provide direct support to Veterans. As Veterans themselves, Peer Specialists can help Veterans identify their own skills and strengths. They may also help the Veteran feel comfortable talking about topics related to their military experience. Learn more at **www.va.gov/health-care/health-needs-conditions/mental-health/**.

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1 Adams, R. E., T. G. Urosevich, S. N. Hoffman, et al. 2017. Social support, help-seeking, and mental health outcomes among veterans in non-VA facilities: results from the Veterans' Health Study. Military Behavioral Health 5, no. 4:393–405.

Social Media Support

In this digital age, it's common to find sources of support online, especially through mobile apps and social media. Caregivers are often connected with Veterans in online communities and can provide and promote additional support and connectedness for Veterans through technology.

That's why VA has partnered with technology organizations — CaringBridge **(www.caringbridge.org)**, PsychArmor (**www.psycharmor.org**), Objective Zero Foundation **(www.objectivezero.org)**, Code of Support Foundation (**www.codeofsupport.org**) and RallyPoint **(www.rallypoint.com)** — that share our commitment to preventing Veteran suicide. These organizations are working with VA to promote social connectedness and expand the reach of lifesaving resources through mobile apps and online platforms. Caregivers can use these technologies to stay connected to the Veterans in their lives and to connect with other caregivers and military families. These social media platforms or apps are easy to use and are available at your fingertips. Learn more about social media safety with VA's toolkit at **www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/docs/OMH-074-Suicide-Prevention-Social-Media-Toolkit-1-8_508.pdf.**

Find additional information on these VA partners in the resources section at the end of this toolkit.

Chaplain Support

In times of stress, turning to religious or spiritual care may help alleviate emotional distress, provide hope, strengthen faith or spiritual connections, and provide social interaction and support. Daily spiritual practices and engagement in a church or other type of faith-based community have been reported to be generally protective against suicide.

VA Chaplains are available as a resource, refuge, or referral point for Veterans and their families and caregivers.

Whether you or the Veteran you care for belongs to a faith community, practices meditation, or simply wishes to seek guidance, VA Chaplains provide support and care and can connect you with resources within VA or in the community.

VA Chaplains serve in a variety of roles, including as a member of the Veteran's clinical care team. They can assist you with decision-making and communication between the Veteran, you as the caregiver, and health care providers. VA Chaplains can also mediate conflicts between Veteran patients, their families, and VA staff members.

In addition, VA Chaplains can help interpret multifaith and multicultural traditions and lead observances, worship, prayers, blessings, and more. Find more information at **www.patientcare.va.gov/chaplain**.

Valuable Self-Care Information for Caregivers

The Veterans Health Administration serves more than 9 million enrolled Veterans annually. An estimated 25% of these VHA enrollees reported needing the support of a caregiver. At VA, we know that for caregivers, the stress of managing responsibilities, tasks, and other needs may take a toll — physically, emotionally, and mentally.

With the number of roles and responsibilities caregivers take on, it can be difficult to care for one's own well-being. Knowing how and when to seek support can be challenging, and life events, careers, families, and other stressors can distract caregivers from seeking care. It's imperative to know how to easily find and access resources that may help.

VA offers numerous services to support caregivers and connect them with resources. These services are available both in and out of the home to provide the best care.

Caregiver Support Program Website

VA's Caregiver Support Program (CSP) website offers tips, tools, and other information and services to family members and friends who care for Veterans. CSP resources include online courses, in-person classes, telephone support, and peer support.

Among CSP resources are caregiver self-care courses: in-person training sessions that focus on supporting and meeting the needs of caregivers. Topics include managing stress, problem-solving and effective communication, taking care of yourself, and using technology.

CSP also provides a Caregiver Support Line to connect caregivers with VA services and local support.

To access self-care courses and other resources for caregivers of Veterans of all service eras, or to connect with a Caregiver Support Coordinator, visit **www.caregiver.va.gov** or call VA's Caregiver Support Line at 1-855-260-3274.

Comprehensive Assistance

The Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC) supports family caregivers of eligible Veterans who have experienced or aggravated a serious injury in the line of duty on or after September 11, 2001. To read more about PCAFC, visit **www.va.gov/health-care/family-caregiver-benefits/comprehensive-assistance/**. It provides enhanced services to eligible family caregivers, including a monthly stipend, counseling and mental health services, respite care, and certain beneficiary travel benefits. Some caregivers may also be eligible for health care through the Civilian Health and Medical Program of VA (CHAMPVA). To read more about CHAMPVA, visit **www.va.gov/health-care/family-caregiver-benefits/champva/**.

In accordance with requirements of the MISSION Act of 2018, VA will expand PCAFC to Veterans of earlier eras in Summer 2020. This expansion will occur in two phases. In the first phase, PCAFC will be offered to eligible Veterans who served on or before May 7, 1975. Phase two will begin 2 years later and will make the program available to eligible Veterans of all eras.

The MISSION Act

Assistance to caregivers of Veterans, including help with suicide prevention and mental health and substance use disorder services, has been bolstered by the MISSION Act of 2018.

Among this act's provisions are mandates adding support and services for Veterans and their families. To learn more and get updates on the progress of the act, visit **www.MISSIONAct.va.gov** or refer to the resources section at the end of this toolkit.

Financial Support Services

VA understands that providing caregiving can affect one's financial stability. Balancing a budget may be challenging, given changes in income or benefits, as well as additional costs. The Caregiver Support Program offers a budget sheet and, along with the USAA Educational Foundation, has developed a series of videos on financial and other relevant topics. To view this series, visit **www.ruralhealth.va.gov/vets/resources.asp#dem** (scroll down to see all the offerings in the caregiver video series).

Maintaining Mental Wellness

As a caregiver to a Veteran, you are mindful of the Veteran's mental wellness, but you also need to maintain your own mental health. Checking in with your physician, seeking support from your friends and community, and finding time to exercise, meditate, or relax are important strategies to consider to increase and maintain your well-being. Several VA resources are available to support you:

- **VA's Caregiver Support Line** is staffed by caring licensed professionals who can connect you with VA services or a Caregiver Support Coordinator at your nearest VA medical center — or just listen if that's what you need right now. Call 1-855-260-3274.
- **Resources for Enhancing All Caregivers' Health (REACH) Intervention** is an evidence-based intervention that provides individual support to overwhelmed caregivers of Veterans with dementia, spinal cord injury, multiple sclerosis, posttraumatic stress disorder, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. Caregivers of Veterans can learn to take better care of themselves and their loved ones by building their skills in stress management, mood management, and problem-solving. Visit **www.caregiver.va.gov/REACH_VA_Program.asp**.
- **Building Better Caregivers (BBC)** is a six-week online workshop for caregivers who are caring for someone with dementia, memory problems, posttraumatic stress disorder, serious brain injury, or any other serious injury or illness. This workshop is geared toward both caregivers of Veterans and Veterans who are themselves serving as caregivers. BBC trains caregivers in

If you are a caregiver in crisis, help is available. In the event of a crisis, get immediate assistance.

- Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-8255** (if you are also a Veteran, press 1**, text to** 838255**, or chat online at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat**).

Confidential intervention and support are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 375 days a year.

providing better care and managing their own emotions, stress, and physical health. For more information about BBC, please contact your Caregiver Support Coordinator.

- **VA's CSP Peer Support Mentoring (PSM) Program** enables caregivers to receive guidance from VA-trained peers and to share their experiences, wisdom, skills, and passion with other caregivers. Developed to strengthen relationships between caregivers, PSM provides an opportunity for networking and empowers caregivers to help each other. For more information, visit **www.caregiver.va.gov/Care_Caregivers.asp**.

Military and Veteran Caregiver Experience Map

VA has partnered with the Elizabeth Dole Foundation to develop a Caregiver Journey Map for military and Veteran caregivers. The map provides a way to document the caregiver journey and provides guidance on how caregivers' evolving experiences affect their lives.

It also provides information that caregivers can use at key points in their journey and details opportunities for intervention through different levels of care and support.

For more information, access the Elizabeth Dole Foundation Caregiver Journey Map page at **https://caregiverjourney.elizabethdolefoundation.org/**.

Resources for Veterans and Their Caregivers and Families

Resource	Description	URL
AARP	AARP's "Military Caregiving Guide: For Veterans, Service Members, and Their Families" addresses five key issues that family caregivers face.	**www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/caregiving/2019/05/military-caregiving-guide-aarp.pdf**
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention	VA, the U.S. Department of Defense, and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) are working together to prevent service member and Veteran suicide by building a nationwide community empowered by research and education. AFSP has chapters across the country whose volunteers provide support and services in their communities.	**www.afsp.org**
CaringBridge	VA works with the global nonprofit social network CaringBridge to strengthen Veterans' connection and communication with their support networks. CaringBridge provides free and secure personal websites as dedicated platforms for families and friends to communicate with and support loved ones during their health care journeys.	**http://caringbridge.org/military**
Centerstone	Centerstone's Military Services network includes more than 1,000 health care providers who serve all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Centerstone connects active military, Veterans, and their families with counseling, housing assistance, employment guidance, therapeutic retreats, and more.	**www.centerstone.org/locations/military-services**
Coaching Into Care	Coaching Into Care is VA's national telephone service to educate, support, and empower family members and friends who are seeking care or services for a Veteran.	**www.mirecc.va.gov/coaching**
Code of Support Foundation PATRIOTlink	Code of Support Foundation's PATRIOTlink® cloud-based navigation platform is a tactical solution that facilitates integrated efforts between support organizations, ensuring that service members, Veterans, and their families get the holistic support they need to successfully transition back into civilian life.	**www.codeofsupport.org/patriotlink**

Resource	Description	URL
Cohen Veterans Network	The Cohen Veterans Network Inc., a not-for-profit philanthropic organization, was created to serve Veterans and their families by providing high-quality, accessible, and integrated mental health care. Through client-centered, customized outpatient care, the organization supports Veterans and their families as they begin their next mission: healthy and happy lives.	**www.cohenveteransnetwork.org**
Disabled American Veterans (DAV)	DAV provides services and support for caregivers of severely disabled Veterans. The Veterans Service Organization provides advocacy for caregiver benefits, as well as education and other caregiver resources.	**www.dav.org/caregiver**
Easterseals	Easterseals supports family caregivers, including caregivers to our nation's Veterans. Support and resources for military caregivers include free caregiving webinars, military caregiver training, and respite care.	**www.easterseals.com/explore-resources/for-caregivers/#militarycaregiver**
Elizabeth Dole Foundation	Founded by Sen. Elizabeth Dole in 2012, the Elizabeth Dole Foundation adopts a comprehensive approach to advocacy, working with leaders in the public, private, nonprofit, and faith communities to recognize military caregivers' service and promote their well-being.	**www.elizabethdolefoundation.org**
Military & Veteran Caregiver Experience Map	VA partnered with the Elizabeth Dole Foundation and Philips to develop the Caregiver Journey Map for military and Veteran caregivers. The map provides a way to document the caregiver journey and provides guidance on how caregivers' evolving experiences affect their lives. It also provides information at key points in a caregiver's journey and details opportunities for intervention through different levels of care and support.	**https://caregiverjourney.elizabethdolefoundation.org/**
George W. Bush Institute: Warrior Wellness Alliance	Veterans often have a specific set of needs in searching for a health care provider. National or community-based providers in the Warrior Wellness Alliance are trusted sources of information and resources for addressing the invisible wounds of war.	**www.bushcenter.org/warrior-wellness/clinical-care.html**

Resource	Description	URL
Give an Hour®	Give an Hour® is a national nonprofit that harnesses the skills and generosity of citizens across the nation and around the world to provide hope and help to those who need mental health support. VA is working with Give an Hour to train the organization in the public health approach, collaborating to reach Veterans where they live and thrive and to connect Veterans with resources and information.	**www.giveanhour.org**
Hiring Our Heroes	The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's Hiring Our Heroes initiative is a nationwide effort to connect Veterans, service members, and military spouses with meaningful employment opportunities.	**www.hiringourheroes.org**
The Independence Fund	The Independence Fund assists severely wounded Veterans of any era, their caregivers, and the entire wounded-Veteran family. The whole-family approach provides the best chance for sustained success in the Veteran's recovery.	**www.independencefund.org/our-programs/caregiver-program/**
Make the Connection	This online resource connects Veterans, their family members and friends, and other supporters with information and solutions to issues affecting their lives.	***MakeTheConnection.net***
National Shooting Sports Foundation	VA and the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) are working together to educate Veterans and their families about ways to prevent suicide by firearm. VA's partnership with NSSF helps educate communities and the firearm industry about the warning signs related to suicide, the safe storage of firearms, and where to go for suicide prevention resources.	**www.nssf.org/safety/suicide-prevention**
Objective Zero Foundation	The Objective Zero app connects service members, Veterans, and their family members and caregivers with peer support through videoconferencing, voice calls, and text messaging. Users also get free access to resources on mental health and wellness.	**www.objectivezero.org/app**
Paralyzed Veterans of America	Paralyzed Veterans of America provides caregiver resources and offers support to Veterans and their families through employment services, legal services, assistance with benefits, and more.	**www.pva.org/find-support/caregiver-support**

Resource	Description	URL
PsychArmor	PsychArmor's free, online S.A.V.E. training was designed in partnership with VA to help anyone learn how to identify the *signs* of Veteran suicide risk, *ask* the Veteran questions, *validate* the Veteran's experience, and *encourage* and *expedite* treatment.	**www.psycharmor.org/courses/s-a-v-e**
RallyPoint	RallyPoint is a social network that connects service members and Veterans to discuss military life, share information, and exchange stories.	**www.rallypoint.com**
Rocky Mountain MIRECC for Suicide Prevention	Rocky Mountain Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center (MIRECC) offers free, online resources for Veterans and their families and caregivers, including Suicide Prevention: A Guide for Military and Veteran Families.	**www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/education/products.asp**
Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregiving	The Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregiving's programs include Dealing with Dementia, Benjamin Rose Institute on Aging Care Consultation, Rosalynn Carter Institute REACH (Resources Enhancing Alzheimer's Caregiver Health), and Operation Family Caregiver. Operation Family Caregiver is a free program for anyone caring for a family member or friend with an injury due to military service from any era. It includes not only visible injuries but also invisible injuries, such as posttraumatic stress, major depression, or a traumatic brain injury.	**www.rosalynncarter.org/programs/operation-family-caregiver**
Semper Fi Fund	Semper Fi Fund provides direct financial assistance and vital programming for combat-wounded, critically ill, and catastrophically injured service members and their families during hospitalization.	**www.semperfifund.org/what-we-do/family-support**
Tobacco Cessation Resources	This website is designed to help Veterans quit tobacco products. The site provides resources to support Veterans during a quit attempt, information on behavioral support programs (including text messaging and app- based programs), and an interactive page about nicotine replacement therapy.	**https://veterans.smokefree.gov/**

Resource	Description	URL
Treatment Works for Vets	VA provides treatments that have been proved effective for mental health concerns. These evidence-based treatments* are time-limited and focus on helping Veterans recover and meet their goals. *For more information on evidence-based treatments, see the VA National Center for PTSD, listed below.	**www.treatmentworksforvets.org**
VA Caregiver Support Program	The VA Caregiver Support Program offers a number of services to support caregivers. Find tips, tools, videos, and links to resources for caregivers of Veterans of all service eras on the website or call VA's Caregiver Support Line at 1-855-260-3274. Every VA facility has a Caregiver Support Coordinator to assist family caregivers with support and services. The online directory of VA Caregiver Support Coordinators is searchable by state and U.S. territory.	**www.caregiver.va.gov** **www.caregiver.va.gov/support**
VA Chaplain Support	VA Chaplains assist in meeting the spiritual health care needs of Veterans. Chaplains provide support and care and can connect Veterans and families with resources within VA or in the community. Every VA medical center has Chaplain coverage 24 hours a day, and spaces for prayer and meditation.	**www.patientcare.va.gov/chaplain/index.asp**
VA MISSION Act of 2018 (Benefits for Caregivers)	The MISSION Act supports improved health care for Veterans and increased support to caregivers. The act supports VA's ongoing suicide prevention and mental health initiatives by bolstering mental health services for women, broadening telehealth services, providing free mobile apps for Veterans and their families, improving access to care, and using telephone coaching to assist Veterans' families. The MISSION Act website enables users to download benefit applications, find benefit coordinators, and more.	**www.MISSIONAct.va.gov**

Resource	Description	URL
VA National Center for PTSD	The VA National Center for PTSD is the world's leading research and education center of excellence on PTSD and traumatic stress. Visitors can sign up to receive research updates, find a provider, get tips and tools, and more. Information on evidence-based treatments is provided in the video "'Evidence-Based' Treatment: What Does It Mean?" and other brief videos about evidence-based treatments for posttraumatic stress disorder.	**www.ptsd.va.gov** **www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/video/index.asp**
VA Pain Management	VA provides links to resources on pain management, including complementary pain management treatments such as physical therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, whole health, and mindfulness.	**www.va.gov/PAINMANAGEMENT/Veteran_Public/index.asp** **www.va.gov/PAINMANAGEMENT/Veteran_Public/Complementary_Treatments.asp**
VA Resources for Substance Misuse, Opioid Overdose Education, and Naloxone Distribution	This site provides information on how to reduce harm and risk of life-threatening opioid-related overdoses and deaths among Veterans through opioid education and naloxone training.	**www.pbm.va.gov/PBM/academicdetailingservice/Opioid_Overdose_Education_and_Naloxone_Distribution.asp** **www.mentalhealth.va.gov/mentalhealth/substance-abuse/index.asp**
VA Resource Locator	The resource locator connects you with local support available through VA, the National Resource Directory, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. This tool can help you find VA Suicide Prevention Coordinators, VA crisis centers, VA medical centers, outpatient clinics, Vet Centers, Veterans benefits offices, and other community-based services in your area.	**www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/local-resources**
VA Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Treatment Locator and Services	There are proven ways to help Veterans recover from alcohol or drug use disorders. VA has many resources to help Veterans and their loved ones get answers to their questions, find support, access treatment, and recover. These links connect you with information about effective SUD treatments available in VA and locations for VA SUD treatment.	**www.mentalhealth.va.gov/substance-abuse/treatment.asp** **www.va.gov/directory/guide/sud.asp**
Veteran & First Responder Healthcare	Veteran & First Responder Healthcare is a Veteran-owned and -operated organization that provides dual treatment for service members, Veterans, first responders, and their families	**www.vfrhealthcare.com**

Resource	Description	URL
	dealing with substance use and behavioral health issues.	
Veterans Crisis Line	The Veterans Crisis Line connects Veterans and their families and friends with qualified, caring VA responders. Call **1-800-273-8255 and Press 1**, text to **838255**, or chat online at **VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat** to receive confidential crisis intervention and support, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.	**www.veteranscrisisline.net**
Wounded Warrior Project Warrior Care Network	Wounded Warrior Project® has partnered with four world-renowned academic medical centers to form the Warrior Care Network®, healing invisible wounds of service and improving the psychological healing of our nation's Veterans. The Warrior Care Network program provides Veterans who are living with posttraumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, and related conditions with a year's worth of mental health care during a 2- to 3-week intensive outpatient program that combines evidence-based treatments with alternative therapies.	**www.woundedwarriorproject.org/programs/warrior-care-network**

Start the Conversation: *Safety Planning*

A PLAN CAN SUPPORT VETERANS AND THEIR LOVED ONES

Veterans who are thinking about harming themselves or who have attempted suicide should create and keep a safety plan. It is important for the Veteran's family members and loved ones to have a copy of the safety plan so they know what to do and where to get help in a crisis.

MAKE A PLAN TO DEAL WITH CRISIS

A safety plan is a written list of coping strategies and sources of support that Veterans can use before or during a suicidal crisis. The plan should be brief, easy to read, and in the Veteran's own words. A safety plan should also be easily accessible to the Veteran and selected family members and friends at all times.

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HOW TO DEVELOP A SAFETY PLAN

Safety planning is a collaborative process. Veterans who are at risk for suicide should work with a loved one, trusted adviser, clinician, VA Suicide Prevention Coordinator, or other mental health professional to create a plan that is right for them.

Safety plans should include the following elements:

- Descriptions of specific experiences, stressors, or other factors that trigger the Veteran's thoughts of suicide
- Strategies the Veteran uses to deal with stressful situations, for example: "When I get home after a bad day at work, I go for a long walk to cool down."
- A list of the Veteran's contacts for social support — those who should have a copy of the plan
- Contact information for emergency professional help and care providers
- Ways to limit access to lethal means, such as weapons and ammunition or large quantities of medication

SAFETY PLAN TEMPLATE*

This safety plan is designed for use before or during a suicidal crisis. This form should be filled out in the Veteran's own words, preferably with the help of a loved one, a trusted adviser, or a mental health professional. If this is your plan, please keep it with you at all times so you have support whenever you need it, and share a copy with family members or friends you trust.

STEP 1: RECOGNIZING WARNING SIGNS

These are my warning signs that things are starting to feel out of control.

Sometimes these warning signs are connected to my thoughts of suicide:

Thoughts: _____

Feelings: _____

Behaviors: _____

Symptoms: _____

STEP 2: USING INTERNAL COPING STRATEGIES

When I notice these warning signs, these are things that I can do on my own to help make sure I do not act on my suicidal thoughts or urges.

These are things that help calm me or distract me from my thoughts:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

It is also important for me to consider:

"Is there anything that might stand in the way of using these coping strategies when I am in crisis?"

STEP 3: PEOPLE AND SOCIAL SETTINGS THAT PROVIDE DISTRACTION

When my initial coping strategies do not fully resolve the situation, I will reach out to others.

To create a personalized list, answer the following:

- Who helps me take my mind off my problems, at least for a little while?
- Who helps me feel better when I socialize with them?
- Are there places I can go (e.g., a coffee shop) that help me take my mind off my problems?

List several people and social settings, in case the first option is unavailable.

1. Name: _____ Phone Number: _____
2. Name: _____ Phone Number: _____
3. Place: _____
4. Place: _____

STEP 4: PEOPLE WHOM I CAN ASK FOR HELP IF DISTRACTION ALONE DOESN'T FULLY WORK

When I need to talk about how I'm feeling, I will contact the people in my life who care about me, are supportive, and want to help.

Those people are:

1. Name: _____ Phone Number: _____
2. Name: _____ Phone Number: _____
3. Name: _____ Phone Number: _____

STEP 5: PROFESSIONALS OR AGENCIES I CAN CONTACT DURING A CRISIS

When I need to talk to a mental health professional or other provider, I will call one:

1. Therapist/Clinician Name: _____ Phone Number: _____
2. Primary Care Provider: _____ Phone Number: _____
3. VA Suicide Prevention Resource Coordinator Name: _____
   VA Suicide Prevention Resource Coordinator Phone: _____
4. Veterans Crisis Line: 1-800-273-8255, press 1
5. Local Urgent Care Services: _____
   Urgent Care Services Address: _____
   Urgent Care Services Phone Number: _____

STEP 6: MAKING THE ENVIRONMENT SAFE

To help keep myself safe, I will remove or safely store things I could use to hurt myself.

This is my plan to remove or safely store the following items: [complete all that apply]

Firearms: _____

Medications: _____

Household toxins/poisons: _____

Sharp or other dangerous objects: _____

Who can help keep these items safe and securely stored? _____

_____

*Adapted from Stanley & Brown's (2008) *Safety Plan Treatment Manual to Reduce Suicide Risk: Veteran Version*

Should a crisis escalate to a point where I need immediate assistance, I will call the

Veterans Crisis Line • 1-800-273-8255 Press 1 • or dial **911**

Confidential crisis chat at **VeteransCrisisLine.net** or text to **838255**