

SOCIAL MEDIA SAFETY TOOLKIT

For Veterans, Their Families, and Friends

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration
Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

#BeThere



Introduction

Scrolling through your Facebook feed, you come across a post from an old high school friend indicating that he's struggling with his recent job loss and separation from his wife, and that he's having trouble paying the bills. He says he feels like it's all just too much to bear and he doesn't see a way out. The content of his post concerns you — but you're unsure of how to help or what you should do.

This toolkit is designed to help navigate scenarios like the above.

We all have a vital role to play in preventing suicide among the Veterans in our lives and communities. An issue from the Bob Woodruff Foundation (BWF) *Stand SMART for Heroes* series suggests that the majority of individuals who die by suicide do not report suicidal thoughts during medical appointments. The research also suggests that less than 10% of individuals who die by suicide post explicitly about suicide on social media. However, some individuals thinking about suicide may post about thoughts of suicide or signs of emotional distress. Social media networks represent an important tool for identifying and preventing Veteran suicide by enabling family members and friends to notice changes in an individual's words and actions.

This toolkit outlines the steps you can take to provide support to the Veterans in your life if ever they express emotional distress, feelings of crisis, or thoughts of suicide on social media — helping to keep them safe and providing and encouraging them to connect with resources.

Guidelines

Suicide prevention is everyone's business. You can play a vital role in suicide prevention by reaching out to someone who is exhibiting warning signs of crisis or suicide risk and by showing your support. Helping someone feel included can make a big difference during a challenging time.

Special training is not required to approach the subject of suicide, and asking others about suicide does not lead them to have suicidal thoughts. In fact, research tells us that asking others the question gives them permission to talk about their thoughts and feelings.

No matter how casually or jokingly stated, comments about emotional distress, crisis, or suicide should always be taken seriously. Someone who talks about suicide, or who shares concerning images on social media, provides others with an opportunity to intervene before suicidal behaviors occur.

According to University of Utah research portrayed in *BWF Stand SMART for Heroes*, Veterans who died by suicide were more likely to:

- Post about stressful events and then immediately talk about emotional distress and negative thoughts.
- Talk about alcohol consumption or post pictures involving alcoholic beverages.
- Post content that rapidly switched back and forth between positive emotional content and negative emotional content.
- Post pictures of personal firearms but not of friends and pets.

How to Recognize and Respond to Emotional Distress on Social Media

The following example language includes signs of emotional distress:

- Hopelessness: "Nothing I do makes a bit of a difference. It's beyond my control."
- Direct statements about suicide: "I'm having thoughts of suicide." "I'm thinking about hurting myself."
- Feeling trapped: "I can't see any way out of this mess. Life will never get better."
- Feeling like a burden: "They'd be better off without me." "I'd be better off dead."
- Lack of belonging: "No one cares. I just don't fit in anywhere."
- Guilt: "It's all my fault. I'm to blame."
- Saying goodbye or desire to escape: "I just wanted to tell everyone thank you for all you've done, but I just can't take this anymore."
- Feeling alone: "I'm on my own. No one cares about me."

Sample Posts and Tweets That Indicate Emotional Distress

The following posts and tweets exhibit signs of emotional distress:

"I suffer with PTSD and hearing loss. Every day is a struggle and I can barely walk. I can't handle these feelings forever."

"The sad thing about this, is I asked for help and kept getting doors slammed in my face, being laughed at, and pushed aside, and forgotten about. I was messed over by the college I chose, they charged more for my degree and I am getting no help from anyone, on that as well. I am fighting 3 different battles just to keep my family where we are because my credit score does not allow me to get a decent job that I went to school for."

"I have been a veteran for over 40 years and not a damn soul has helped me out. I am a service connected disabled vet and it has been an uphill, lonely battle by myself."

"When I returned I thought I was fine for a second then every night waking up crazy scaring the crap out of everyone, anger out of control and all the elements playing over and over."

Sample Responses to Posts and Tweets That Indicate Emotional Distress

Responses like the ones below can make a big difference to a Veteran in emotional distress ... and may even save a life.

Facebook

@ screen name: In tough times you can feel like you are battling life all on your own. Other Veterans have felt this way too. Whether you just returned from a combat deployment or experienced another kind of traumatic event, it's never too late to get professional treatment or support. Find resources near you to help: <https://maketheconnection.net/resources>

@ screen name: As a Veteran, I am really sorry to read what you are going through. It sounds like a really difficult time. There are resources in your community that can help. Use the VA resource locator at <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/local-resources> to find local resources for Veterans, such as Suicide Prevention Coordinators, Crisis Centers, and Vet Centers in your community.

@ screen name: I read your post, and it sounds like you are really hurting right now. Click the link below to find resources and support from people who care and who can help you through this. Visit the Suicide Prevention Lifeline website at <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/help-yourself> to find local mental health professionals and support groups and learn how to make a safety plan.

Twitter

@ screen name: As a Veteran, it concerns me to hear you are going through this. Other Veterans have felt this way too. Click the following link to find resources and support from people who care and who can help you through this. <https://maketheconnection.net/resources>

@ screen name: In tough times you can feel like you are battling life all on your own. There are resources in your community that can help. Use the VA resource locator to find local Suicide Prevention Coordinators, Crisis Centers, and Vet Centers. <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/local-resources>

@ screen name: It sounds like you are really hurting right now. Visit the Suicide Prevention Lifeline website to find local mental health professionals and support groups and learn how to make a safety plan. <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/help-yourself>

How to Recognize and Respond to Signs on Social Media of a Potential Crisis

Posts and tweets that include discussion of the following behaviors are signs of a potential crisis and require 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 drug abuse, weapon use, etc.

Everyone has a role to play when it comes to preventing Veteran suicide. If you notice someone on social media exhibiting signs of a potential crisis, don't wait for somebody else to take action. Follow these steps:

1. Contact the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1. Do this regardless of whether there is an immediate threat of suicide or harm to others.
2. Reply to the post with one of the safe messaging examples provided in this toolkit, which include information on the Veterans Crisis Line and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.
3. Report the post to the social media platform, using the resources provided in this toolkit.

Reporting Suicidal Content on Facebook

- **Facebook – Suicide Prevention:** View Facebook's recommendations for what to do if you see suicidal content on the platform.
- **Facebook – Report Suicidal Content:** Fill out this form to report suicidal content found on Facebook.

Reporting Suicidal Content on Twitter

- **Twitter – About Self-Harm and Suicide**: View Twitter’s recommendations for what to do if you see suicidal content on the platform.
- **Twitter – Report Self-Harm**: Fill out this form to report suicidal content found on Twitter.

Sample Posts and Tweets That Indicate a Possible Crisis

“I live with the feeling that I should have died in Viet Nam instead of others”

“Still Suffer from nightmares, night sweats, awake screaming and yelling from my sleep, think of suicide all the time, but being a part time Reservist, I do not get VA benefits, I live with the evil since coming home 2006. Have no family, wife died in 2010, and all alone. Have major health problems, wish I had my life back, but it’s gone, I am glad others are getting well, I am 50 years old and well soon it will be time to go to heaven.”

“I understand I am a Viet Nam veteran and I live alone. Sometimes I wonder, what’s the use of living if my children do not talk to me”

“No help for me in my state. No one specializes in DID or MDD, to name a few of my labels. I’m giving up as everytime I go, the billing department thinks after two visits, I should be cured. Cleaning my house out and getting things in order. When I’ve had enough, I’m outta here. Abusers dead, children and friends shunned me. Fine. I get it. Too much for them to handle. How do they think I feel about it. They don’t care. Got blindsided by it. I don’t care anymore. My only regret is that I didn’t run in front of a bus when I got diagnosed”



Sample Responses to Posts and Tweets That Indicate a Possible Crisis

Responses like the ones below can make a big difference to a Veteran in crisis ... and may even save a life.

Facebook

@ screen name: I've dealt with those thoughts too, and I can tell you that treatment works. Know that help and support are available from people who care and who can help you through this. Call the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1, text to 838255, or chat online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/Chat). A responder will talk with you anonymously.

@ screen name: It concerns me to hear about what you're going through. Know that you are not alone and there is support that can help. Call the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1, text to 838255, or chat online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/Chat). A responder will talk with you anonymously.

@ screen name: I'm sorry to hear you are hurting like this. It sounds like a difficult time. Other Veterans have felt this way too. There are people who can help. Call the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1, text to 838255, or chat online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/Chat). A responder will talk with you anonymously.

Twitter

@ screen name: It concerns me to hear about what you're going through. You are not alone, and there is help. Call the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1, text to 838255, or chat online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/Chat).

@ screen name: I'm sorry to hear you are hurting like this. Things can and will get better. Call the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1, text to 838255, or chat online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/Chat).

@ screen name: You are not alone. Call the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1, text to 838255, or chat online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/Chat). You can also send a text message to them at 838255. A responder will talk with you anonymously.



Social Media Suicide Prevention Resources

- **Social Media Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention:** Follow these tips for communicating about mental health and suicide on social media to help reduce stigma and increase help-seeking.
- **Support for Suicidal Individuals on Social and Digital Media:** This toolkit from the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline helps digital community managers and social media platforms establish safety policies for helping individuals in suicidal crisis.

Additional Suicide Prevention Resources

- **Veterans Crisis Line:** If you or someone you know is in crisis, connect with the Veterans Crisis Line to reach caring, qualified responders. Contact the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1, chat online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](https://www.VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat), or send a text message to 838255.
- **#BeThere:** These tips and tools can help you show your support for Veteran friends and family members and start the conversation about suicide prevention.
- **Coaching Into Care:** Coaching Into Care is a national telephone service from VA that aims to educate, support, and empower family members and friends who are seeking care or services for a Veteran.
- **Make the Connection:** [MakeTheConnection.net](https://www.MakeTheConnection.net) is an online VA resource designed to connect Veterans, their family members and friends, and other supporters with information, resources, and solutions to issues affecting their lives.
- **PsychArmor S.A.V.E Training:** This training is designed to help anyone who interacts with Veterans learn to identify the *Signs* of suicide, *Ask* questions, *Validate* the Veteran's experience, and *Escort* the Veteran to care and *Expedite* treatment.
- **VA Resource Locator:** Hosted by the Veterans Crisis Line, the resource locator connects you with local support available through VA, the National Resource Directory, and behavioral health treatment services from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.
- **Action Alliance Framework for Successful Messaging:** This framework helps people develop messages about suicide prevention that are strategic, safe, and positive and that make use of relevant guidelines and best practices.

- **Bob Woodruff Foundation’s “How to Use Social Media Patterns to Identify Veterans At Risk for Suicide”:** This study suggests that social media platforms represent an important and valuable tool for identifying and preventing Veteran suicide.
- **Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide** and **Recommendations for Blogging on Suicide:** These sites offer recommendations for safely reporting on suicide to maximize the effectiveness of communications and reduce the risk of harmful effects stemming from unsafe messaging.

Anyone can help prevent Veteran suicide.

Anyone can help prevent Veteran suicide. Your actions can make a lifesaving difference when you reach out to a family member or friend you are concerned about and provide resources that can help. As you scroll on social media, look out for warning signs of suicide risk that are outlined in this toolkit, and follow the steps to provide support for the Veterans in your life and your community. #BeThere