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Joint Chiefs chairman: Troops' mental health needs to be priority

- Story Highlights
- Adm. Michael G. Mullen on Tuesday spoke to military families in Washington
- Joint Chiefs chairman: Military need help from more mental health professionals
- Mullen singles out Fort Hood, Texas, for its gains in addressing stress
- Despite day-to-day issues, Mullen says, deployment still is big factor in stress

By Greg Clary
CNN

WASHINGTON (CNN) -- America's highest ranking military officer said Tuesday the nation must do more for the mental health of American soldiers, warning statistics show "there are going to be more [troop] suicides this year than last."

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Michael G. Mullen, said the military lacks the number of mental health professionals necessary to help returning or soon-to-deploy troops deal with the high stress of war. He said he's working to get more money to increase the number of counselors so more soldiers can be helped.

Mullen made the comment to an audience of military families during a breakfast sponsored by The Hill newspaper at the Liaison Hotel in Washington.

"I think we need to get to a point where everyone is screened by a competent mental health professional," he said.

Officials say 64 soldiers have committed or are suspected of having committed suicide this year in the Army alone. That puts it on a grim pace to break last year's record of 133.

The issue came to a head last week as Fort Campbell in Kentucky stood down for a three-day suicide prevention event after 11 soldiers there committed suicide this year.

Suicides aren't the only result of stress on military personnel. The Army charged Sgt. John Russell with the murder of five fellow soldiers at a stress clinic in Baghdad's Camp Liberty last month. Russell's commander had referred him to [counseling](#) because of concern for his mental health.

But there are some strategies that seem to be helpful in treating stress, Mullen said. He singled out Fort Hood in Texas, saying that even though the facility has 30,000 more soldiers than Fort Campbell, there had been only one suicide at Fort Hood as of April.

"The general out there had essentially focused on relieving stress [and] not just attacking the suicide issue, and he'd done it very systematically," [Mullen](#) said. "It just shows that when leaders apply themselves, we can make a big difference there."

Attacking the overall stress level in soldiers may be more effective than just worrying about [suicides](#), the admiral said, as troops face stress not just in war but in day-to-day life, as well.

"We are working hard to understand the underpinnings of this and, broadly, many of these suicides occur based on failed relationships, financial problems in a history too often discovered after the tragic event," Mullen said.

In fact, half of the suicides at Fort Campbell were committed by soldiers who had never deployed.

But Mullen said there is still a connection.

"I've heard people use that as a reason that would very possibly say the deployments don't have anything to do with it, and I just don't

believe that," Mullen said. "I believe there is a relationship between those who haven't deployed but are going to deploy and all of the stress and hype that you hear as you get ready to go on your first deployment."

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