

Army takes new approach to suicide prevention

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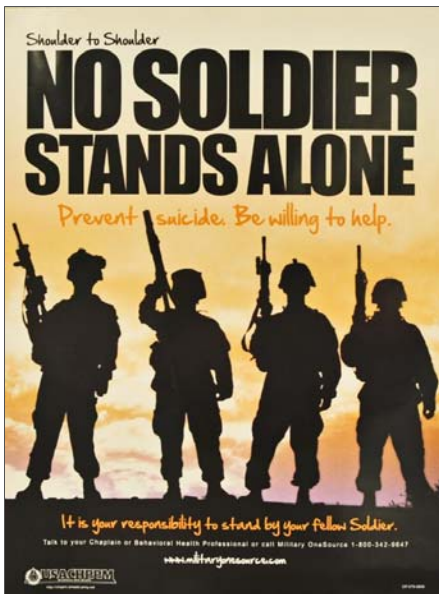


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The Army will begin suicide prevention chain-teaching March 15 through June 15. The new briefing includes an interactive video, suicide prevention tip card and an "ACE" of hearts guideline on how to help a buddy who might be considering suicide.

BAGHDAD, Iraq (Army News Service, June 12, 2009) -- As the number of Soldiers committing suicide continues to rise, the Army's suicide prevention campaign shifts its focus to junior leaders in an effort to arm them with the tools they need to help their Soldiers before a problem reaches a tragic end.

A recent Army study shows that 60 percent of suicides are carried out by first-time deployers. That percentage may be hard to believe as news agencies continue to report on how the Army is stretched thin and Soldiers are on their second, third or fourth tours here.

"Soldiers who have deployed before have been able to build resiliency, and they are able to adapt to situations because they have been placed in similar ones before," said Chaplain (Col.) Kenneth Stice, Multi-National Corps-Iraq command chaplain. "First time deployers need to build that same resiliency, and that is hard to do."

The MNC-I Suicide Prevention Action Plan, December 2008, puts chaplains in theater at the forefront of unit-level suicide prevention training. Stice and his religious support team are ready to take the lead, providing an outlet for Soldiers to come to if they need help, as well as provide additional suicide prevention training to units.

"We have a tremendous chaplain corps that has done significant work in helping to combat (the suicide) trend," said Air Force Maj. Gen. James Hunt, MNC-I deputy commanding general.

Hunt explained that chaplains are not alone in their efforts to combat suicides, as behavioral health programs and systems already in place offer options to servicemembers, such as Rest and Restoration Centers and combat stress clinics throughout Iraq and Afghanistan.

The first step is to educate Soldiers on suicide prevention in three phases.

Phase I is the Army's "Stand Down" video, and is usually shown at a Soldier's home station prior to deploying.

Phase II, which is currently being conducted in theater, is the "Shoulder-to-Shoulder: No Soldier Stands Alone" video, followed by a discussion where Soldiers are able to share their personal experiences, discuss the causes of suicide and ways they can help their fellow Soldiers.

"The video is very transparent, very candid and the goal of it is to reduce the stigma of seeking help, because the cost of suicide hurts families and units alike," Stice said.

Phase III is annual training that reiterates lessons from the previous two phases.

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- The Army's new three-step A.C.E program aims to help Soldiers recognize others that may be at risk.

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Prior to his deployment in March of this year, 1st Sgt. Chad Wood lost two Soldiers to suicide within six days of one another.

"It ripped me apart to lose them," Wood, first sergeant of Company A, Special Troops Battalion, Task Force Courage said somberly.

The first, a senior noncommissioned officer in Wood's section, was a personal friend, while the other Soldier was a junior NCO who, Wood said, he was able to relate to.

"He reminded me a lot of myself at that age. He was a great Soldier, and everyone respected him," he said.

"Regardless of the reasons they chose to take their own lives, nothing is that hard that it is worth ending your life. Nothing," said Wood.

While no situation is worth a Soldier taking their life over, it is happening and in alarming numbers. While Phase II is not geared at stopping every individual from committing suicide, Stice said, it will help put a stop to some.

"It's just not possible to prevent every suicide from happening, but if we can train those not at risk to be able to identify and help others, then that will be a true measure of effectiveness," Stice said.

With that, the Army developed the three-step A.C.E. program: Ask your buddy, Care for your buddy and Escort your buddy. Pocket-sized cards offer instructions for Soldiers who may not know what to do when a buddy seems like they may be contemplating suicide.

"In order for this program to work, leaders will need to know their Soldiers. If they don't know their Soldiers, how will they be able to tell that they are at risk?" Stice said.

Wood said that the junior-leader approach helps the NCOs to be more in touch with the Soldiers, as well as senior leaders and commanders to be more in touch with their junior NCOs.

"It's the NCOs that see the frustrations and emotions of their Soldiers on a daily basis," Wood said. "They are more directly related and involved with them because they spend more time with them and know them better. "

It's not just NCOs who are junior leaders, but also young lieutenants, said Hunt, who added that although junior leaders know individual Soldiers in their unit or team better than anyone else, the campaign also focuses on the benefits for the entire force regardless of rank or time in service.

"By training our junior leaders to better recognize the early behavioral changes or common risk factors of suicide, it is our hope that they will then take the next step and get that Soldier the help that he or she needs," Hunt said.

Getting a person to the right place for help is a crucial step, but make sure that person is never alone, Stice said.

Stice explained that there are many options available to someone who is in need of help. While talking to a friend may be able to solve a problem, other issues arise that may require more than a talk with a battle buddy.

Stice said that his religious team is available around the clock. If a person is reluctant to speak to a chaplain, behavioral health specialists, medical providers and combat stress teams are also available, he said.

"We have leaders everywhere that will stop work to save a life," Stice said, adding that in order to save a life, a person must care about life.

Stice said there are people at Victory Base Complex and beyond who care deeply and who are willing to help anyone at any time who may be struggling with thoughts of suicide.

"We will not rest until we have reversed this awful suicide trend," Hunt said. "But we need the help of every Soldier, Sailor, Airman and Marine to take an active role in suicide prevention-ask, care and escort-you are empowered to help each other, and help us, prevent suicides."

The Army Suicide Prevention Task Force has also produced a new "Suicide Pamphlet for Leaders" to help Army commanders educate their Soldiers on the risks of suicide and help keep them safe. The pamphlet also details how and when to intervene and provides resources, such as the Military OneSource Crisis Line at 1-800-342-9647 (in the U.S.).