

Military study shows increase in suicide attempts, PTSD symptoms

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A wide-ranging Department of Defense survey revealed the rate of servicemembers attempting suicide has doubled in recent years, coinciding with an increase in those reporting symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and those abusing prescription drugs.

The study, which surveyed more than 28,500 active-duty personnel on a number of health issues, showed that 2 percent of servicemembers surveyed said they attempted suicide in the past year. In the 2005 study, only 1 percent of respondents said they attempted suicide.

“We’ve seen increases in suicide rates over the last several years,” said Robert Bray, the study’s senior program director. “I think this data is consistent with what we are seeing there.”

The 2008 Survey of Health Related Behaviors, released late Wednesday, was conducted by researchers with the Research Triangle Institute. It was last taken in 2005.

The percentage of servicemembers admitting to PTSD-like symptoms rose from 7 percent in 2005 to 11 percent in 2008. The largest jumps came from soldiers and Marines.

Soldiers who said they had PTSD-like symptoms rose from 9 percent to 13 percent, while Marines reporting such symptoms nearly doubled, from 8 percent to 15 percent.

“The stresses of repeated deployments are playing a part in the trends we are seeing,” said Jack Smith, acting deputy assistant secretary for clinical and program policy for the assistant secretary of defense for health affairs. “We’re working on the stigma aspect of this and there are more screening opportunities out there, so people are becoming more aware of this.”

Respondents were not asked whether they had consulted anyone about their symptoms, but Smith said servicemembers have many more opportunities to be screened for PTSD during pre- and post-deployment assessments.

The survey also showed that about 11 percent of troops admitted to misusing prescription drugs, mostly painkillers, during the previous month. About 15 percent of soldiers and 11 percent of Marines said they misused prescription drugs. Only about 7 percent of airmen said the same thing, the lowest number among the branches.

Troops abused pain relievers at a rate triple that of marijuana or amphetamines, the next most widely abused drugs among the survey's respondents.

What's more, the number of troops who said they misused prescription drugs nearly tripled from the last time the survey was conducted.

"I think this appears to be a nationwide trend," Smith said. "This phenomenon of abuse of prescription drugs seems to be an increasingly common issue, which we are seeing in this survey."

Researchers said making exact comparisons to earlier surveys is difficult because questions were changed after 2005 to keep the language in line with similar civilian studies. For example, the word "analgesics" was changed to "pain relievers," and the questions tried to probe deeper into whether servicemembers were using prescribed medications in ways not intended by their doctors.

"The questions about prescription drug use are rather new," Smith said. "This time we've drilled down on it as a major issue."

The survey also looked at alcohol and tobacco use.

Heavy alcohol use — defined as five or more drinks during one occasion at least once a week — was higher among servicemembers in the age range of 18 to 35, compared to their civilian counterparts.

Bray said a history of drinking within the military may influence younger servicemembers.

"There is a bit of culture that has developed," Bray said, about drinking. "And the younger people may think that is accepted practice, even though there are lots of efforts to dissuade them from doing that."

The rate, however, was lower among older military personnel when compared to the civilian population. Also, the number of military people who said they drank heavily remained little changed since 2005, at 20 percent.

"We did identify this as a concern in 2005," Smith said, citing recent campaigns such as the "That Guy" ad, aimed at soldiers who drink excessively. "But the problem has not gone away."

The survey did contain some good news.

Cigarette smoking declined from 34 percent in 2002 to 31 percent in 2008, and the number of military people who said they exercised at least three times a week increased. Also, there was a sharp decline in the number of servicemembers under the age of 20 considered overweight. And more than 70 percent of respondents said they were satisfied with their job.

“In spite of the many stressors from the many deployments,” Smith said, “we see a remarkable degree of health and resilience.”