



Help Those Who Lost a Loved One to Suicide

Death by suicide can be devastating for the people left behind, and military families are more likely than those in the general population to experience such a loss. On average, 13.3 per 100,000 people take their own lives in the U.S. Among active duty service members, that rate is 20.2 per 100,000; 24.7 among reserves; and 27.1 among National Guard members.

The risk for veterans is even higher. Veterans make up just 8.5 percent of the U.S. population, yet account for 18 percent of all adult suicide deaths in this country.

The suicide of a loved one brings out complex emotions that can complicate the grieving process. If you are helping a military family who has lost a loved one to suicide, they may feel:

- **Guilt** for not being able to prevent the death
- **Anger** at their loved one for abandoning them, at themselves for missing warning signs, and at others who they believe may have had a role in the suicide
- **Confused** by unanswered questions
- **Rejected** by their loved one

Your clients may also have symptoms of depression and trauma, especially if they witnessed the suicide or found the body. Common reactions include:

- Nightmares
- Flashbacks
- Difficulty concentrating
- Loss of interest in usual activities

In addition, survivors may be haunted by painful memories instead of fond memories. They may look at photos or videos and wonder whether their loved one was truly happy or whether the smile hid despair. They may question everything they thought about their relationship. Your clients may also fear that their loved ones will be remembered for the way they died rather than for their military service and other accomplishments.

You can help your military families in the following ways:

- **Reassure them that the suicide is not their fault.** Most people who die by suicide are severely depressed. This affects their problem-solving skills and robs them of optimism.
- **Prepare them for unhelpful comments from well-intentioned people.** People may say the loved one is “in a better place,” reassure the bereaved that they’ll marry again, or advise them to “stay strong” These comments may make your clients feel worse. Help them focus on the sentiment behind the words rather than the words themselves.
- **Encourage them to talk about their loved one.** They may not reach out for the support they need because of the social stigma around suicide, but remaining silent about their experience will make it much harder to move forward.
- **Help your clients tap into their social support systems.** They need understanding people to talk with, lean on, help with household chores and meals, and more.
- **Encourage your client to join a support group.** Being with others who have lost loved ones to suicide can be especially comforting and healing.

Finally, remind your clients that there is no “right” way to grieve. Nor is there a time limit. A suicide can take years to process. Grief can reemerge at any time, especially during holidays and other significant dates. By seeking the help they need and understanding their own grief, your clients will heal.

If you know of someone experiencing a mental health crisis or thoughts of suicide, help is available 24/7 through the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (8255), or [visit their website to chat online](#).

Learn more about Beacon’s commitment to suicide prevention by reviewing our white paper, [We Need to Talk about Suicide](#).

If you are interested in providing non-medical counseling to military service members and their families through Military OneSource, please email us at:
mosproviderrelations@militaryonesource.com.