Social Support and Belongingness as Protective Factors

From Science to Practice
Using Research to Promote Safety and Prevent Suicide

Issue

People who appear or describe themselves as lonely may be at increased risk for suicide. However, mounting evidence suggests that social support and belongingness decrease one's risk for suicide. Clinicians can help Veterans by asking about social support mechanisms and involving family members in their mental health treatment, when needed.

Key Findings

- The effect of social support in protecting against suicidal behavior is well documented.[1,2,3,4] But studies tend to treat social support as a single construct, even though it comprises positive and negative components, as well as objective and subjective ones.[5,6] And they tend to lump together various types of social support (e.g., support from family, friends, significant others, and coworkers).

- The buffering hypothesis may help explain how psychological constructs that influence interpersonal relationships magnify the impact of interpersonal risk and protective factors.[7] Giving credence to the hypothesis is the fact that perceived social support moderates the impact of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on suicidal behavior.[8] Social connectedness also lowers one's risk for suicidal behavior and moderates the impact of depression on suicide attempts.[9]

- High-quality relationships with family and friends prevented young adults from contemplating suicide as a way of solving their problems.[10] However, even with strong bonds, people must have the necessary social skills to ask for help when they need it.

Veteran-Specific Studies

- Postdeployment social support, "in the form of accessibility of family and friends and greater sense of purpose and control," protects against suicidal ideation among Veterans.[11] Postdeployment social support also moderates the effect of PTSD and depression symptoms on suicidal ideation.[12]

- Veterans with better social support have more positive mental health outcomes, including lower rates of suicidal ideation.[13]

- Family stress and a lack of family support during deployment are associated with postdeployment suicidal ideation, but PTSD and depression largely account for this association.[14]

- Satisfaction with intimate relationships buffers against postdeployment suicide risk among service members with anxiety, depression, or PTSD.[15] Conversely, lower relationship satisfaction is significantly associated with increased suicide risk.[16,17]

Belongingness

- According to the interpersonal theory of suicidal behavior, thwarted belongingness (the unmet basic human need to belong, characterized by loneliness and the absence of reciprocal, caring relationships) is a necessary ingredient for suicidal ideation.[1]

- Multiple studies confirm that the more individuals with substance use disorders perceive themselves as belonging, the less likely they are to attempt suicide or have suicidal ideation.[18,19]

- For example as, Air Force personnel age, belongingness protects against the development of suicidal ideation regardless of combat experience.[20]

Implications

Social support, perhaps perceived social support especially, may protect against suicidal behavior, including among individuals with PTSD, depression, or anxiety.

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Ways You Can Help

- Assess Veterans for the presence of social connections and assess perceptions of social support among Veterans with PTSD or depression.

- For Veterans who express or show signs of relationship difficulties, consider evidence-based programs such as cognitive-behavioral conjoint therapy for PTSD, integrative behavioral couple therapy, or emotionally focused therapy.

- Prompt Veterans in mental health treatment to consider involving their significant others in their care when possible. A shared decision-making framework can be useful for this discussion.

- Involve relatives in suicide safety planning; Veterans may be open to family member involvement in this activity.[21]

- Inform Veterans' families about Coaching Into Care, a resource for relatives and friends who wish to help Veterans access care, available at **www.mirecc.va.gov/coaching**.

- In addition to seeking the support of significant others, consider leveraging other forms of support or social connection, such as peer support, support groups, participation in volunteer activities, and other sources of belongingness and connection available in and outside VA.

> **There is no single cause of suicide. It is often the result of a complex interaction of risk and protective factors at the individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels. To prevent Veteran suicide, we must maximize protective factors and minimize risk factors at all of these levels.**

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