



# PREVENTING SUICIDE AMONG OLDER VETERANS

Resources and tips for Veterans,  
family members, caregivers, and friends

## Aging and Suicide Prevention

Aging can bring new life experiences and opportunities. At the same time, older Veterans can face challenges related to health, memory, independence, or relationships—this sometimes leads to hopelessness and thoughts of suicide. No matter how or when someone served, no matter what they're going through, support is available and there's hope.

## Warning Signs

Every Veteran is different and, even if having thoughts of suicide, may not show any signs of intent to kill themselves. But some actions and behaviors can be a sign that they need help. Learn to recognize the signs of crisis so you can support a Veteran going through a difficult time.

- Expressing hopelessness (feeling things will never get better)
- Becoming extremely anxious, upset, or unable to calm down
- Talking about suicide or wanting to die
- Saying they feel like a burden
- Saying that others would be better off without them
- Planning for suicide (when, where, or how they might do it)
- Taking actions, such as giving things away or buying ammunition

## What Veterans Can Do

To maintain meaning, purpose, and interpersonal connection:

- Stay connected to your family, friends, and community.
- Focus on the activities you can still do, if you can't do all the things you used to enjoy.
- Remember how much you've contributed to others in your lifetime.

- Ask for help when you need it.
- Talk to your health care provider about concerns like pain, sleep, functioning, and mood.
- Get involved in volunteer opportunities (for example, see what VA offers at [volunteer.va.gov](https://www.volunteer.va.gov)).

## What Families, Caregivers, and Friends Can Do

- Remember that Veterans may be reluctant to seek help.
- Check in with the Veteran regularly, don't wait for them to reach out.
- Join the Veteran at health care appointments. Take notes, voice concerns, and follow up if necessary.
- Help connect them with mental health care, if needed.
- Help ensure their home is safe.
- Take VA S.A.V.E. Training.

## Making the Home Safe

Since many suicide crises are brief, increasing the amount of time and space between a Veteran and access to a household risk can save lives.

### Firearms

Firearms are the most common method of suicide among older Veterans. Consider these firearm safety tips:

- Store firearms unloaded, locked, and secured when not in use, with ammunition stored and locked in a separate location.
- Secure storage options include cable gun locks, lockboxes, and locked gun safes, cabinets, or storage cases. Free cable gun locks are available from your local VA medical center. Community organizations and local law enforcement agencies may also distribute free cable gun locks.

## Medications

Medications should be safely and securely stored when not in use. To help prevent intentional or unintentional overdose:

- Have a family member or friend help manage medication dosages.
- Ask your doctor or pharmacist to limit the number of refills or quantity of medication.
- Portion out pills for a week and lock the rest away.
- Check the date on everything in your medicine cabinet and dispose of medication if:
  - The medication is past its expiration date.
  - You haven't used the medication in the past 12 months.
  - You no longer need the medication.
- Ask your doctor or pharmacist about options for safely storing medications or disposing of unused medications.

For more information, go to [KeepItSecure.net](https://www.KeepItSecure.net).

## VA S.A.V.E. Training

VA S.A.V.E. Training is a free, brief online or in-person course that gives you four ways to support a Veteran in crisis or having thoughts of suicide. The acronym S.A.V.E. provides a helpful way to remember the step-by-step instructions:

### **Spot the signs a Veteran might be thinking about suicide**

Learn to recognize signs that could mean a Veteran needs help.

### **Ask the critical question—“Are you thinking of killing yourself?”**

Though it may seem scary, talking with someone about suicide can help them open up and consider accepting support.

### **Validate the Veteran's experience**

It's important to let the Veteran know you're listening and to acknowledge their experience.

### **Encourage and support next steps with the Veteran**

If a Veteran is having thoughts of suicide, remain calm and reassure them help is available. Don't keep suicidal behavior a secret and don't leave the Veteran alone. Seek care from the nearest hospital or call 911.

Anyone can take VA S.A.V.E. Training: [learn.psycharmor.org/courses/va-s-a-v-e](https://learn.psycharmor.org/courses/va-s-a-v-e).

## VA Resources

### Veterans Crisis Line

If you're a Veteran in crisis or concerned about one, contact the Veterans Crisis Line to receive 24/7, confidential support. You don't have to be enrolled in VA benefits or health care to connect. To reach responders, **Dial 988 then Press 1**, chat online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](https://VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat), or text 838255.

### Don't Wait. Reach Out.

The “Don't Wait. Reach Out.” website provides VA resources for a wide variety of issues affecting Veterans and encourages them to reach out for help before their challenges become overwhelming or reach a crisis point. If you or a Veteran you know needs support, find resources at [VA.gov/Reach](https://VA.gov/Reach).

### VA Services for Older Veterans

Learn about VA programs that support older Veterans and their families and caregivers: [mentalhealth.va.gov/older-veterans/index.asp](https://mentalhealth.va.gov/older-veterans/index.asp).

### Make the Connection

Watch, read about, and listen to Veterans' real stories of strength and recovery: [MakeTheConnection.net](https://MakeTheConnection.net).

### VA Geriatrics and Extended Care

Find out about home and community services, long-term care, health, fitness, and rehabilitation: [www.va.gov/GERIATRICS/](https://www.va.gov/GERIATRICS/).

### VA Caregiver Support Program

Learn how VA supports family caregivers through education, resources, and services: [www.caregiver.va.gov/](https://www.caregiver.va.gov/).

