

VFW Stands Up Against Military Suicides

May 28, 2009

Dear Comrades:

There is an enemy in our midst that is having a devastating effect on our servicemen and women in the field and at home. That enemy is stress.

Since 9/11, more military personnel and veterans have committed suicide than the total dead from both wars in Iraq and Afghanistan combined, and this tragedy is occurring despite the best of intentions and programs offered by the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs. That is because the need has overwhelmed the capacity of government and civilian mental health centers. It's also because some people simply refuse to admit they need help.

After incurring 11 suicides since the beginning of the year, the 101st Airborne Division commander at Fort Campbell, Ky., ordered a three-day standdown of activities this week so that his soldiers could refocus on the mission of healing themselves and each other.

This is a very positive initiative, but more needs to be done to overcome the stigma that's unfortunately attached to seeking help, which Army Secretary Pete Geren called a significant challenge to the culture of the Army that places "a premium on strength: physically, mentally, emotionally."

Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen even asked his military leaders to set an example for lower ranking personnel. "You can't expect a private or a specialist to be willing to seek counseling when his or her captain or colonel or general won't do it," he said.

Since then, general officers as well as sergeant majors have admitted publicly to mental health counseling. And even though few of them would be seen manning remote outposts, and still fewer would be at risk of being separated from the military due to "preexisting personality disorders," their personal testimonials do help to lessen the stigma attached to seeking help.

But still more must be done, and that's because the very nature of ground warfare is upfront

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and personal, which means experiences will last a lifetime – and for a 22-year-old combat veteran, that is a very long time to keep an emotional trauma buried.

Our government cannot battle this enemy alone and nor should that 22-year-old. Combat is personal, and so must be our outreach efforts. That's why I am issuing this call to action to urge every VFW member to get immediately involved by seeking out and extending a hand of friendship and help to your local servicemembers – active, Guard and Reserve – and to their families, too.

Few of us are probably qualified as mental health professionals or trained counselors, but every VFW member has one thing in common that makes us very relevant to this new generation of warriors: We have walked in their shoes.

We have to look them in the eye and say, “Everything is going to be alright.” We need to lend a sympathetic ear and tell them that we were once 20-something, and that we understand their fears and emotional rollercoaster. What's most important is that we were able to overcome our internal demons and successfully move on with our lives.

Trust is king, so ideally this needs to be done in one-on-one meetings or in small groups away from military installations and VFW Posts primarily for privacy, but also to help eliminate real or perceived fears of retribution from civilian employers or military commanders.

We also have to guide them to a department service officer to help process the maze of required paperwork that will entitle them to professional help as well as compensation if service-connected. The faster we do this the better, because many suicides occur during the long waiting period between claims filing and adjudication. VFW will do everything it can at the national level to get the process speeded up, but fast isn't always fast enough when you need help. That's why the friendships and mentorships you establish at the local level are so crucial. You have to be the calming effect in their storm.

From 9/11 through last week, almost 1,900 men and women have committed suicide while on active-duty or in Guard or Reserve status. Still worse is a Centers for Disease Control estimate that 18 veterans from all wars commit suicide every day — that's 6,500 a year!

Those are shocking statistics, so this call to action is for you to get involved today. Our mission is to "Honor the dead by helping the living," and I can think of no more immediate cause to rally behind than to help those who can benefit from a firm handshake, a sympathetic ear, and a sincere thank you for doing ones duty.

Our nation is in a war and we have comrades in arms who need our help. The VFW must stand up against military suicides by getting involved today in all of our communities.

Yours in comradeship,

Glen M. Gardner Jr.
Commander-in-Chief

HELP RESOURCES

VA Suicide Hotline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255) National Suicide Hotline: 1-800-SUICIDE (784-2433)

Click [here](#) to watch a video about what one Post is doing to help prevent military suicides.