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PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH PROGRAM
NATIONAL GUARD BUREAU

Suicide Prevention

WVNG *Coffey Break*

By Elizabeth Coffey

Break (brāk) definition *verb*: To interrupt or stop *break a habit*; *noun*: A respite or brief pause *taking a break*.

Welcome to the September 2010 edition of the WVNG Coffey Break, a monthly Wellness publication for all WV National Guard members and their families. The objective is to promote wellness, readiness and resiliency by providing information and resources on topics relevant to daily living.

September is *Suicide Prevention Month* and as such, this edition is devoted to this topic. However, instead of discussing warning signs of suicide, which is the typical approach, the main focus of this edition will be on prevention factors that proactively address this serious issue. Perhaps you are a person with strong coping skills or have not been directly impacted by suicide. Unfortunately, though, most of us know someone who has either resorted to suicide as a means of escaping a problem or has seriously considered self harm. You may even be their first line of defense. So please, take a few minutes to read the following article before hitting "Delete" on your computer.

Protective Factors

Ultimately, the prevention of suicide would best be accomplished by enhancing supports and strengths. We spend a great deal of time trying to identify risk factors and stressors associated with suicide. Educationally, this does serve a purpose. However, research is beginning to identify RESILIENCE or protective factors that can positively impact psychological distress. The presence of these factors can prevent a variety of ineffective behaviors including violence, substance abuse, and suicide, even in the presence of stressful events or environments.

Personal Protective Factors:

- Easy Temperament
- Previous Experience with Problem Solving, Crisis Resolution
- Optimistic Outlook
- Social/Emotional Competence
- High self esteem, self worth
- Decision Making Skills
- Sense of Personal Control
- Sense of Belonging to a Group and/or Organization
- High and Realistic Expectations
- High Spiritual Resiliency

Environmental Protective Factors:

- Strong Family Relationships
- Models of Healthy Coping
- Encouragement of Participation
- Opportunities to Make Significant Contributions
- Available Social Supports
- Available Helping Resources
- Healthy Spiritual/Religious Affiliation
- Cultural and Religious Beliefs Against Suicide and in Support of Self Preservation

Don't let yesterday use up too much of today
~Cherokee Indian Proverb

The mission of the National Guard Psychological Health Program is to advocate, promote and guide National Guard members and their families by supporting psychological fitness for operational readiness. For contact information regarding the Director of Psychological Health in your state or territory or other resources, go to: www.jointservicessupport.org/

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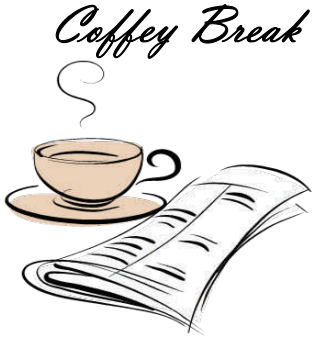

Free & Confidential Resources

Military OneSource
1-800-342-9647.
www.MilitaryOneSource.com

National Suicide Prevention Hotline
1-800-273-TALK (8255)
24-hour hotline available to anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress.

"Someone to tell it to is one of the fundamental needs of human beings."

~Miles Franklin

One of the most important tasks a person can do when having thoughts of self harm, is to consider reasons for living. Marsha Linehan, a prominent researcher in suicidology, developed a 48-item scale, the Reasons for Living Inventory which differentiates suicidal from nonsuicidal individuals. Items on the self-assessment tool represent categories of protective factors that may moderate suicidality during stressful situations. The following variables are considered:

- survival and coping beliefs - (i.e. I have hope that things will improve and the future will be happier)
- responsibility to family – (i.e. It would hurt my family too much and I wouldn't want them to suffer)
- child-related concerns
- fear of suicide
- fear of social disapproval
- moral objections – (i.e. I consider it morally wrong)

Life Satisfaction Scale

Using a similar concept, the satisfaction scale assesses the following 10 areas of a person's life based on a rating scale of 1-10 (least to most satisfied). As you read the categories, feel free to take a quick "inventory" of your own satisfaction with life:

- Appearance
- Eating
- Energy
- Home
- Love
- Others
- Money
- Projects
- Recreation
- Self-Sufficiency

Depending on your responses, you may be able to identify areas of your life that need to be improved. For example, if I knew my eating habits were poor, I would want to select healthier food choices. Studies have shown that a person's health is impacted by what they eat. Consequently, if a person feels better, their attitude will be more positive.

Key Factors

Spiritual Resiliency

Spiritual resiliency is an important aspect that strengthens one's resolve to live. In the Army's Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Program, spiritual resilience is included in the curriculum. According to an interview with Brigadier-General Rhonda Cornum, who organized the program, "The US Army has never provided training to soldiers for their emotional and psychological strength. We thought that being in the Army, and adhering to the Army's values of 'mission first', 'never quit', and 'never leave a fallen comrade' and so on, would lead to emotional and psychological strength simply emerging. But after eight years of war, with much of the Army going to the front-line every other year, we're very stressed. So we realized we would probably be better served if we had a preventative program for psychological and emotional strengthening, rather than a reactive one that only began after someone had developed a problem."

When asked how a publicly-funded program could improve the 'spiritual' strength of an army, without conflicting with a multi-faith society in which the government is supposed to be secular, she responded, "The spiritual strength domain is not related to religiosity, at least not in terms of how we measure it. It measures a person's core values and beliefs concerning their meaning and purpose in life. We assess their self-awareness, their sense of ownership and responsibility, their self-regulation of thoughts and feelings which they can control, that those things don't randomly appear, that self-motivation is important, and social awareness is important. It's not religious, although a person's religion can still affect those things." Brigadier-General Cornum also indicated that the Spiritual Training was optional, unlike the other domains.

Regardless, it has been proven that the very act in believing adds to our resilience. Like emotional resilience, spiritual resilience grows when shared. But unlike all other factors or "pillars" of resilience, it is spiritual resilience that refills itself. It is not so much what we believe but that we DO believe in some form of high order, high wisdom, or higher power a "God" or guiding force in life. It makes sense that acting on our beliefs would add to our resilience. Chaplains are an valuable resource to this end and are well-trained in ministering to individuals of various backgrounds, faiths and beliefs.

Support in the Military

During World War II, personnel discovered that an individual's *sense of belonging and integration into his/her particular unit* influenced how he (she) would stand up to the stresses of combat. Thus, promoting cohesion and being alert for withdrawal or isolation are important strategies for the prevention of suicide and other destructive behaviors. Whether we are addressing deaths by combat or suicide, the same principle applies: Connections Save Lives.

It is extremely important for leaders to be aware of and readily share information about the various support programs and services available to the Guard Member and their family. In addition, it is important to ensure that services are accessible to troubled individuals. Suicidal thoughts and behaviors are often a symptom of a very treatable mental and/or spiritual illness. However, seeking help for such concerns is often very difficult, particularly for males. Leadership must continue to combat the stigma of mental illness and help-seeking behavior by modeling and promoting seeking help as a sign of effectively dealing with problems and of strength rather than weakness.

Leadership

The role of leadership in suicide prevention cannot be overemphasized. Strong leadership is an advantage and is the reason why protective factors can be more effectively promoted and sustained in the military than in civilian settings. Ever since the first military system was devised, a prominent characteristic of an effective leader has been the ability to protect those under his/her command. A good leader does not expose those under his/her command to unnecessary risk. This applies to death by suicide just like it does to other senseless injury or death. Thus, it is the responsibility of Leadership from the top commander down to the smallest unit leader to promote the safety of all military personnel. This can be done in the following ways:

- Promote a norm of mutual "Buddy or Wingman Care" among all military personnel: "We *are* our brother's keepers!"
- Pay attention to warning signs and respond to those who need help. If anyone suspects or knows that a fellow guard or family member, or anyone else is troubled, provide or get help for them.
- Be aware that heightened stress, relationship problems, and impending holidays can trigger inappropriate coping behaviors in vulnerable individuals. Pay close attention to the personal needs of your people, and be on the lookout for signs of stress.
- Communicate in your words and actions that it is not only acceptable, but a sign of strength, to recognize life problems and get help to deal with them constructively.
- Support and protect to the fullest extent possible those courageous people who seek help early, before a crisis develops.
- Create a responsive, caring, and responsible environment where individuals are motivated to seek help with personal struggles without fear of being singled out.
- Create and promote opportunities for social interactions that are important in improving a unit's supportive structure. These range from large group events to private gatherings. Make sure that you foster a social climate in your unit that communicates to everyone, 'you belong here'.

Knowing the warning signs and risk factors are important in the prevention of suicide. These were addressed in the September 2009 issue of the WVNG Coffey Break. If you would like a copy, please feel free to contact me via phone or email.

Feedback on this article is welcomed. As always, if you have a concern about yourself or a family member, feel free to contact me. Services are free and confidential. I look forward to hearing from you. So.....Step back , take a Coffey Break, and Drink to Your Health!

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Life is a great big canvas, and you should throw all the paint on it you can. ~Danny Kaye

Level of Suicide Risk

Low — Some suicidal thoughts. No suicide plan. Says he or she won't commit suicide.

Moderate — Suicidal thoughts. Vague plan that isn't very lethal. Says he or she won't commit suicide.

High — Suicidal thoughts. Specific plan that is highly lethal. Says he or she won't commit suicide.

Severe — Suicidal thoughts. Specific plan that is highly lethal. Says he or she will commit suicide

References:

-U.S. Army Resource Manual - Prepared by the American Association of Suicidology and The U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine

-www.suicidepreventtriangle.org/Suichap8.htm#Chap8_Reason

-Ezinearticles.com/Filling-The-Canteen-Of-Spiritual-Resilience

Next Month: The Power of Positive Thinking

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