

**PULL
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LIFT-OUT SECTION

Hot Topics

CURRENT ISSUES FOR ARMY

LEADERS • SPRING 2000



Inside:

MESSAGE FROM THE ARMY CHIEF OF STAFF

GEN Eric K. Shinseki 3

ARMY 1999 SUICIDE STATISTICS 4

COMMANDER'S CHECKLIST 5

**PULL-OUT POSTER WITH
SUICIDE WARNING SIGNS** 7

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS 12

Suicide Prevention

“Could I have done more?”

STUDIES show the suicide rate tends to increase in the spring months. Therefore, the spring issue of *Hot Topics* is dedicated to suicide prevention. Suicide corrodes unit readiness, devastates troop morale, and causes profound and often lifelong suffering and guilt for the families, friends and leaders of the suicide victim. Commanders and leaders can help decrease the number of suicides by stressing suicide prevention. Ask yourself, “How would I feel if I lost one of my soldiers to suicide?”

MESSAGE FROM THE

Chief of Public Affairs

THIS issue of *Hot Topics* is intended to alert and educate commanders and leaders about the danger of suicide and to provide information about suicide prevention. We hope this timely information will provide a useful tool to help stop the preventable, needless tragedy of suicide among our soldiers. We welcome your feedback and suggestions for future issues of *Hot Topics*.



MG John G. Meyer Jr.
Chief of Public Affairs

Hot Topics

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Army Suicide-Prevention Program

WE have a serious problem with suicides in the Army. The Army's suicide rate increased in calendar year 1998, and it appears to have increased once again in calendar year 1999. In the first five days of January 2000 we had four suspected suicides. Suicide prevention is the business of commanders and leaders.

We must understand the potential for suicides and increase awareness for recognizing individuals who are at risk or exhibiting self-destructive behavior. It is our responsibility to help our soldiers and civilians understand how to identify at-risk individuals, recognize warning signs and know how to take direct action. Then we must act to provide immediate, active assistance and intervention.

Persons contemplating suicide are often incapable of reaching out for help. Providing that help is our responsibility. Commanders must exemplify, by personal example, the Army's existing policies and programs. Training is critical — suicide-prevention training must be conducted to standard and the status of training must be tracked during command



GEN Eric K. Shinseki
ARMY CHIEF OF STAFF

briefings. We are reviewing our suicide-prevention program in a commitment to having the best possible tools and resources available to you and your commanders. The key to suicide prevention rests with commander, leader and soldier involvement in caring for our suicide-prone individuals. I need your urgent attention to this matter. We must take better care of our people.

It is our responsibility to help our soldiers and civilians understand how to identify at-risk individuals, recognize warning signs and know how to take direct action.

Army Suicide Statistics

Sixty-five soldiers are known to have killed themselves in 1999. There were 12 other deaths last year with as yet undetermined official causes; however, all of these deaths are suspected suicides. The Army suicide rate thus appears to have increased for the second consecutive year, with an estimated rate of 15.49 per 100,000 in 1999.

Some other alarming statistics for 1999 highlight the need to train all soldiers in suicide prevention. In the past, suicide-prevention training has been targeted at junior enlisted soldiers (18- to 25-year-olds). However, in 1999 the average age of soldiers committing suicide rose to 30.

Senior leaders may not recognize the need to attend suicide-awareness training, but in 1999 four field-grade Army officers committed suicide.

Senior NCOs in crisis were proportionally one of the Army's highest at-risk groups in 1999. They are 10 percent of the overall Army population but comprised 23 percent of the total suicides for 1999.

Taking a Proactive Approach

A proactive suicide-prevention program is fundamental to averting the needless tragedy of suicide in the Army. Suicide is preventable, and leaders must play an active and sensitive role in showing care and concern for their soldiers. Positive leadership, careful listening and deep concern for soldiers are key to suicide prevention. Know your soldiers and their concerns, and never hesitate to obtain professional help for a soldier in need.

We all experience periods of vulnerability in our lives. The key to preventing suicide in the unit is to respond quickly to any verbal, behavioral or situational clues. Soldiers need to be taught to take any suicidal statement by a fellow soldier seriously, and to inform the chain of command immediately.

Prevention efforts must also focus on the personal responsibility of commanders and leaders to care for the soldiers under their charge. Commanders and leaders must be aware of, and use, local assistance resources, including the training provided by chaplains and the help available from medical personnel.

Individuals who are in the best position to recognize a soldier's despair are often friends, close associates and first-line leaders. Jokes, threats or expressed desires about committing suicide should be taken seriously. Delays in intervention may result in a preventable suicide.

We are soldiers 24 hours a day, not just during the normal workday. Concern about the welfare of a fellow soldier and taking the proper action are the best possible defenses against suicide.