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of Veterans Affairs

# Substance Use and Suicide Prevention in the Veteran Population

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# Overview

1. Identify at least **3** unique characteristics of the Veteran population and to implement this into **recovery** and **safety planning**.
2. Learn the impact of substance use recovery as it relates to suicide prevention.
3. Innovative interventions within the VA system and beyond.





## A Little Housekeeping Before We Start:

- Suicide is an intense topic.
  - If you need to take a break, or step out, please do so.
- Immediate Resources:
  - National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: **988**
  - Service members and Veterans should **press 1** to connect with the Veterans Crisis Line.



# Language Matters

## Preferred Language

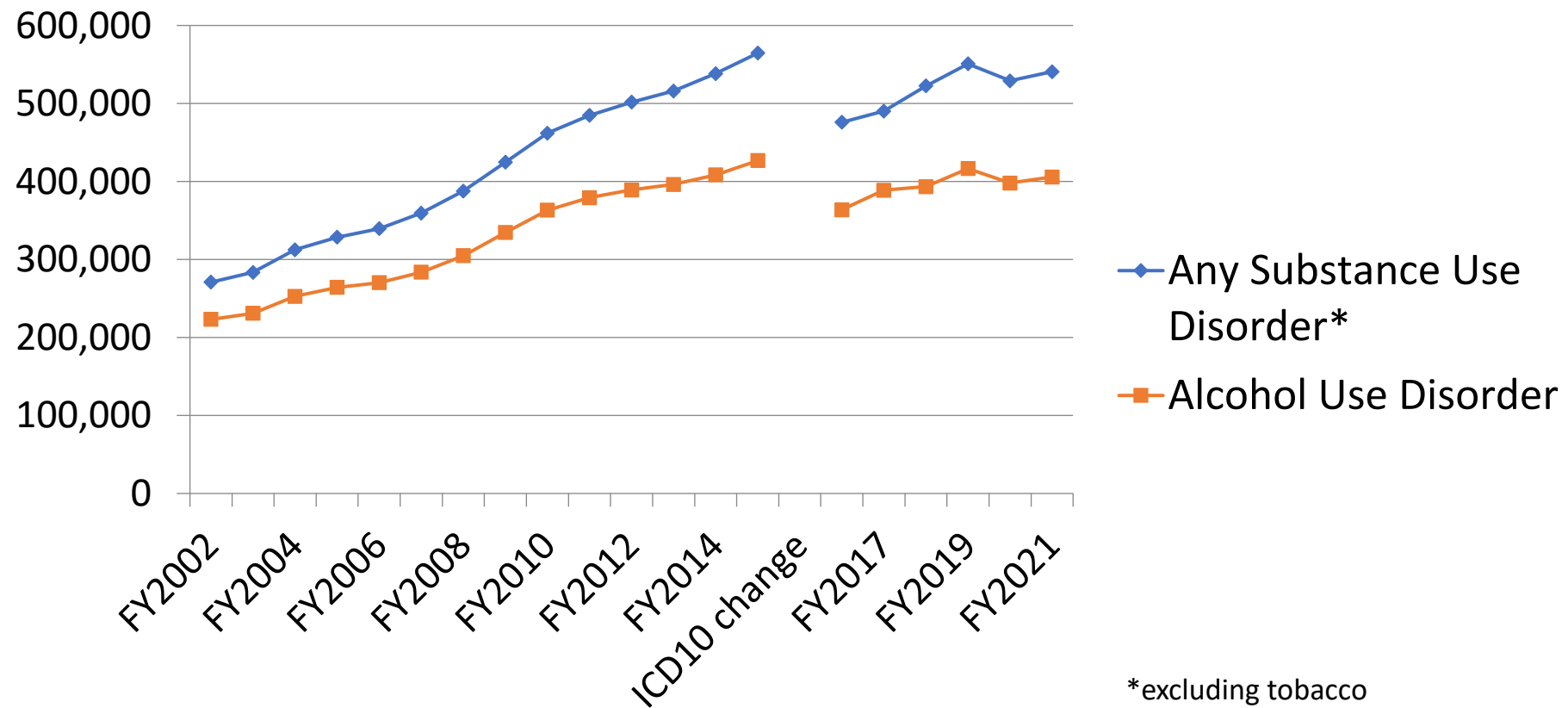
- Died by suicide
- Killed themselves
- Attempted suicide
- Suicide attempt
- Suicide loss survivor

## Language to Avoid

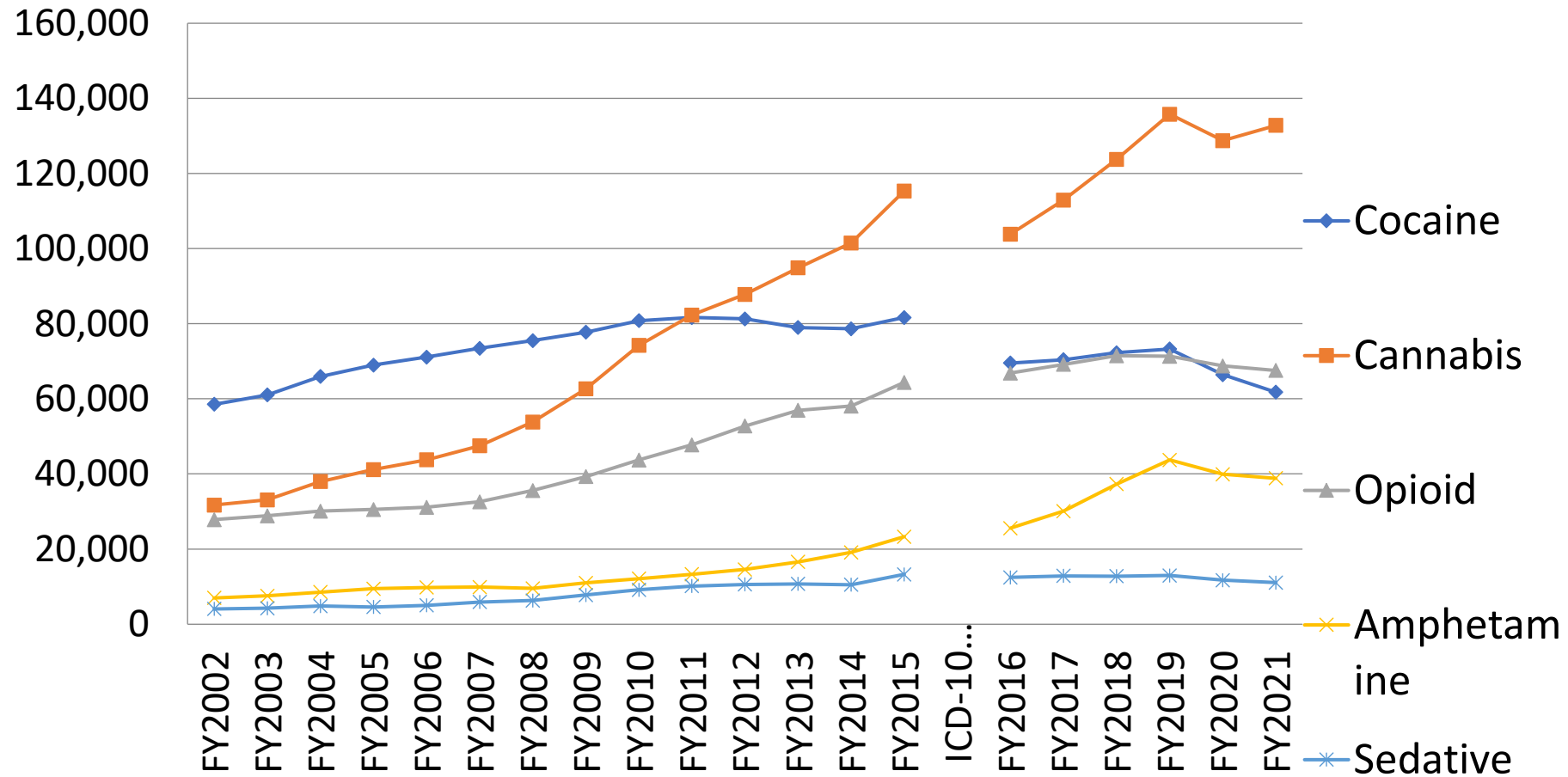
- Committed suicide
- Successful suicide
- Completed suicide
- Incomplete suicide attempt
- Unsuccessful suicide
- Failed attempt



# VA Trends in Alcohol & Substance Use Disorders



# VA Trends in Drug Use Disorders



# Common Reasons for Substance Use:

- Commonly used for **pain** treatment
  - Low-strength evidence that cannabis alleviates neuropathic pain
    - Lack of research in comparison
  - Can be short term solution- with long term effects
- Commonly used for **PTSD** symptoms
  - Mixed and low evidence and research- unregulated doses
  - Short term relief with long term effects
  - Intoxication **and** withdrawal mirror PTSD symptoms
    - Emotional Dysregulation- anger, depression, isolation
    - Intense psychological distress and/or dissociation
    - Sleep disturbance and/or recurrent distressing dreams
    - Marked physiological reactions
    - Avoidance





# Warning Signs and Triggers:

- **HALT:** Hungry, Angry Lonely, and/or Tired
- **Anniversaries:** Deployment and Holiday Celebrations (fireworks: smell and sound)
- **Recent loss:** relationship (divorce/break-up/death) or income (positive losses); loss of community/comradery
- Engaging in **risky activities** (wet faces and places): *war movies, news, social media updates*
- Romanticizing
- **Withdrawing** from family and friends
- **Change** in eating or sleeping habits
- Be mindful of **trading** one habit for another





# Protective Factors and Support Network:

- Sense of connectedness, (social and emotional well-being): sober friends/family and outlets
- Mission or purpose – reason to stay sober
- Access to healthcare
- Employment/Income/Transportation/stable housing
- Problem-solving skills
- Employability/Education/Transferable Skills
- Sense of spirituality
- Caring for someone under the age of 18



# FY22 SUD Funding Initiative Memo

- To respond to priorities defined by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), VA developed a SUD-specific budget to support new mental health positions
  - Funded through at least 2024
- The SUD initiatives included in the budget closely align with the Administration's drug policy priorities and reflect VA's commitment to:
  1. Expand access to evidence-based care, close the treatment gap, and respond to emerging drug threats
  2. Enhance employment opportunities for Veterans in recovery
  3. Support ongoing education and training to ensure Veterans continue to have access to state-of-the-art, evidence-based treatment for substance use concerns
- The [FY22 SUD Budget Request Memo](#) and [SUD Budget 2022 Attachment A](#) provide specific details
  - Total of five funded initiatives: *Supported Employment Expansion, Peer Support Expansion, Stepped Care for SUD, SUD Residential Access, Case Management for Supported Services for Veteran Families.*
- Two initiatives impacting PCMH: **Peer Support Expansion** and **Stepped Care for SUD**



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## Primary Care is the Ideal Setting to Address Substance



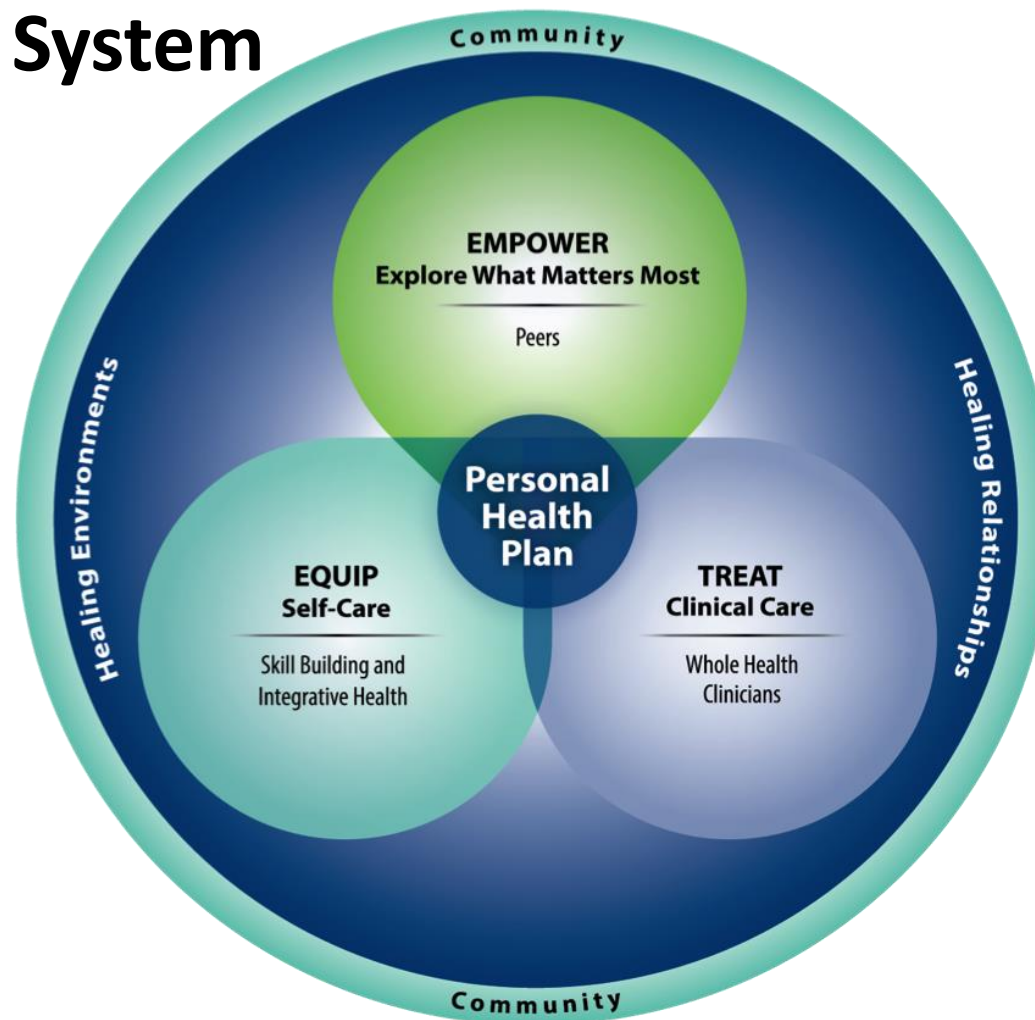
**PRIMARY CARE IS AN OPPORTUNE SETTING TO IDENTIFY RISKS, INTERVENE EARLY, AND OFFER ASSISTANCE TO THOSE IN NEED.**

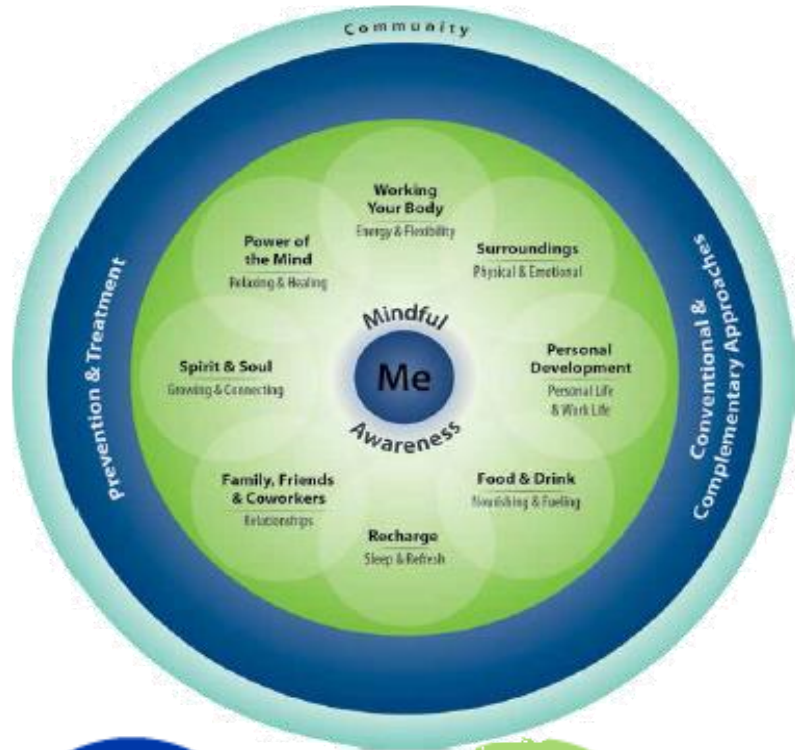
- ✔ *Routine health maintenance and sick visits provide natural openings for screening, brief interventions, and referral for treatment when warranted.*

## Additional Evidence Based Interventions: Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT)

- Patients with moderate to severe SUD should be offered [MAT \(VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guidelines for SUDs\)](#)
- It is appropriate to discuss with mild SUD
- Treatment of side effects due to mild withdrawal
- A broad base of evidence supports the use of medications
  - Multiple RCTs and meta-analyses
- Can help delay return to substance use, reduce cravings
- Medications, in general, are safe and well-tolerated
- It can work in tandem with psychosocial interventions
- It is entirely appropriate for a PCMHI Prescriber to advise a PCP on using MAT or to manage it themselves

# Whole Health: The Whole Health System



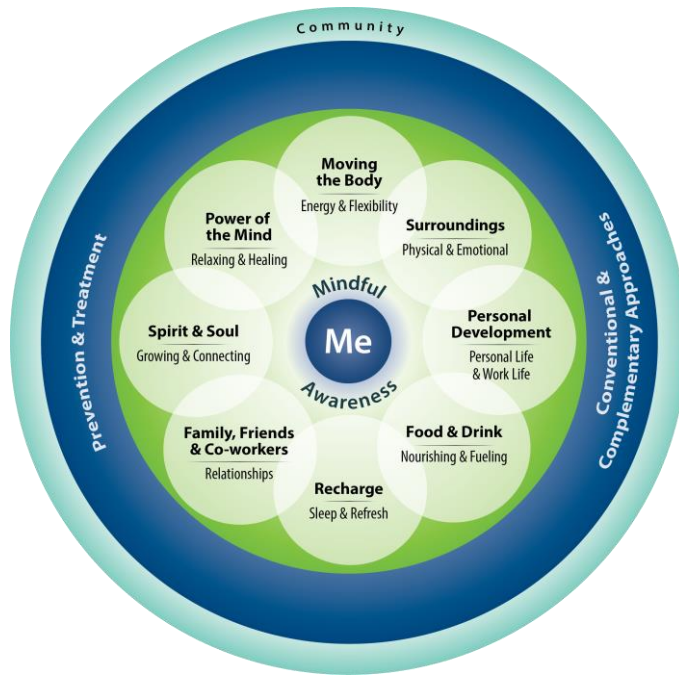


The Whole Health Approach Addresses:  
The Human Element  
Self-Directed Care  
Clinical Care





## Whole Health and Recovery Complement Each Other



Strengths-based  
Person-centered  
Holistic  
Relational  
Many Pathways  
Appreciates cultural differences



*What other similarities do you notice?*

*What are unique elements each brings?*





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# QUESTIONS?

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# VA Suicide Prevention Resources



# Additional Safety Planning Resources

- **Rocky Mountain MIRECC:** tools related to safety planning, risk stratification, and how to consult with subject matter experts. <https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/clinical/>
- **VA Safety Plan:** helps develop a safety plan in case there is a crisis. <http://starttheconversation.veteranscrisisline.net/pdf/what-is-a-safety-plan>
- **Suicide Safety Plan:** a free mobile app designed to prevent suicide by supporting those dealing with suicidal thoughts. <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/suicide-safety-plan/id1003891579>
- **Virtual Hope Box:** a free mobile app for veterans and their health care providers to use as a treatment tool for managing negative thoughts and feelings about suicide. <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/virtual-hope-box/id825099621>
- **PTSD Safety Plan App:** self help apps for education and support. <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/index.asp>



[KeepItSecure.net](https://www.KeepItSecure.net)



[KeepItSecure.net](https://www.KeepItSecure.net)



# Free, Confidential Support 24/7/365



**988 Press 1**

• • • • Confidential chat at **VeteransCrisisLine.net** or text to **838255** • • • •

- Veterans
- Family members
- Service members
- Friends



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# Make the Connection

- Online resource featuring hundreds of Veterans telling their stories about overcoming mental health challenges

**MAKE THE**  
**CONNECTION**  
*www.MakeTheConnection.net*



[MakeTheConnection.net/conditions/suicide](http://www.MakeTheConnection.net/conditions/suicide)



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# <https://www.va.gov/contact-us/>

Where to call	Toll-free number	Hours
My VA 411 (Main information line)	<a href="tel:800-698-2411">800-698-2411</a>	24/7
Telecommunications Relay Services (using TTY)	<a href="tel:711">711</a>	24/7
VA Benefits Hotline	<a href="tel:800-827-1000">800-827-1000</a>	Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. ET
GI Bill Hotline	<a href="tel:888-442-4551">888-442-4551</a>	Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. ET
VA <b>Health</b> Benefits Hotline	<a href="tel:877-222-8387">877-222-8387</a>	Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. ET
My HealtheVet Help Desk	<a href="tel:877-327-0022">877-327-0022</a>	Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. ET



# Coaching into Care



- National VA telephone service which aims to educate, support, and empower family members and friends who are seeking care or services for a Veteran

**CALL 888-823-7458**



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# Social Media Safety Toolkit

- As discussed in the **National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide**, social media is an important intervention channel and a key piece of VA's comprehensive, community-based suicide prevention strategy.
- The Social Media Safety Toolkit for Veterans, their families, and friends equips everyone with the knowledge needed to respond to social media posts that indicate a Veteran may be having thoughts of suicide.
- The toolkit includes best practices, resources, and sample responses.



Download at [https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide\\_prevention/docs/OMH-074-Suicide-Prevention-Social-Media-Toolkit-1-8\\_508.pdf](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/docs/OMH-074-Suicide-Prevention-Social-Media-Toolkit-1-8_508.pdf)



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# Community Provider Toolkit

- Free online training on Veteran issues, including military culture, for health care providers
- Includes tips for screening clients for military service
- Access the toolkit online: [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/community\\_providers](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/community_providers)



# Resources for Clinicians

## SUICIDE RISK MANAGEMENT Consultation Program FOR PROVIDERS WHO SERVE VETERANS

### Why worry alone?

The Suicide Risk Management Consultation Program provides free consultation for any provider, community or VA, who serves Veterans at risk for suicide.

### Common consultation topics include:

- Risk Assessment
- Conceptualization of Suicide Risk
- Lethal Means Safety Counseling
- Strategies for How to Engage Veterans at High Risk
- Best Practices for Documentation
- Provider Support after a Suicide Loss (Postvention)

*#NeverWorryAlone*

[www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/consult](http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/consult)

To initiate a consult email:  
[SRMconsult@va.gov](mailto:SRMconsult@va.gov)

### VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline

### Assessment and Management of Patients at Risk for Suicide

### GUIDELINE SUMMARY



VA/DoD Evidence Based Practice

[www.healthquality.va.gov/guidelines/MH/srb](http://www.healthquality.va.gov/guidelines/MH/srb)



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# VA App Store | VA Mobile <https://mobile.va.gov/appstore/>



### VA Video Connect



Secure video visits with your VA care team from anywhere.

iOS Web Android



### COVID Coach



Receive tools to support self-care and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

iOS Android



### Rx Refill



Request, refill and track VA prescriptions with ease.

iOS Android



### Virtual Care Manager



Create, view, and join video visits.

Web

## ★ TOP VETERAN APPS

[See all >](#)



### Annie App for Veterans



Receive text reminders to help you manage your care.

Web



### VA Launchpad for Veterans



One app to launch them all! Launch VA apps from here.

iOS Android



### VA Online Scheduling



Schedule, request and track VA appointments with ease.

Web



### COVID Coach



Receive tools to support self-care and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

iOS Android

## ♥ TOP PROVIDER APPS

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**be there.**



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