

Supporting Veterans in the Workplace: Suicide Awareness for Supervisors and HR

By Yuri Archer LMHC, MSW | FCH EAP Clinical Case Manager | Veteran

Veterans bring extraordinary strengths to the workplace. They bring skills like discipline, adaptability, and leadership, yet they also face unique mental health challenges. For supervisors and HR professionals, understanding the warning signs of distress and fostering a supportive environment can make a life-saving difference.

Understanding the Issue

Suicide among veterans remains a national concern. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA, 2024), **veterans account for roughly 13.5% of all suicides in the United States**, even though **they represent about 6.6% of the adult population**. Factors such as combat exposure, chronic pain, post-traumatic stress, and challenges transitioning to civilian life can elevate risk. However, meaningful employment and supportive supervisors are protective factors that strengthen resilience and reduce suicidal ideation (Hoffmire et al., 2022; Monteith et al., 2020).

Knowing the Challenge

Transitioning from military to civilian life can bring unique stressors. Veterans may struggle with loss of structure, purpose, or belonging, as well as mental health challenges such as PTSD, depression, or chronic pain (Holliday et al., 2020). Employment, however, can be a significant protective factor, and meaningful work provides purpose, identity, and community (Zogas, 2017).

Supervisors who are aware of these dynamics can make a powerful difference. Recognizing that each veteran's experience is unique and that resilience and vulnerability often coexist helps leaders provide the right balance of empathy and professionalism.

Continued on the next page

The Role of Supervisors and HR

Supervisors and HR leaders are in a unique position to help. Veterans often view their workplace as a new “unit”. It is a team they depend on for structure and purpose. When supervisors foster trust and connection, it can reduce isolation and improve well-being (APA, 2023).

Key steps supervisors can take

- **Recognize warning signs:** Notice sudden withdrawal, changes in work performance, expressions of hopelessness, or agitation.
- **Initiate compassionate conversations:** Approach with empathy, e.g., “I have noticed you seem different lately; how are you doing?” and listen without judgment.
- **Know referral pathways:** Keep contact info for your Employee Assistance Program (EAP), crisis lines, and veteran resources readily available.
- **Promote belonging:** Simple acts like recognizing contributions, clarifying expectations, and encouraging peer support build protective workplace connections.

Creating a Supportive Workplace

HR can play a pivotal role by ensuring training and policies reflect awareness and compassion:

- Offer mental health training for managers, emphasizing confidentiality and support.
- Include veteran resource information in onboarding and benefits materials.
- Collaborate with local veteran organizations or VA outreach coordinators for workshops and awareness events.
- Promote use of the **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (Press 1 for Veterans)** in workplace communications.

Quick win checklist to reduce suicide in the workplace

- Add a “translate military experience” prompt to job interviews.
- Pair each new veteran hire with a peer mentor for 60–90 days.
- Run a 1-hour team session about military to civilian skill translation.
- Publicize internal contacts for accommodations and veteran benefits.

Conclusion

Veterans’ sense of mission and service can be a guiding light within any organization, but that light needs care, understanding, and connection. When supervisors and HR leaders recognize the signs of distress and respond with compassion and resources, they not only prevent tragedy but also build a culture of trust, strength, and humanity.

Continued on the next page

References

- American Psychological Association. (2023). Veteran suicide prevention: What employers can do. APA Center for Organizational Excellence.
- Hoffmire, C. A., et al. (2022). Employment, social connectedness, and suicide risk among U.S. veterans. *Psychological Services*, 19(2), 403–412.
- Monteith, L. L., et al. (2020). Employment and meaning as protective factors against suicide among veterans. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 276, 109–116.
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (2024). 2024 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report.
- U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. (2023). 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: Veterans Crisis Line.

Reach out to FCH EAP for support

Workplaces play a considerable role in our mental well-being. We can all learn how to support each other and create a culture where it's okay to talk about mental health. This means fostering open conversations, learning how to recognize warning signs, and knowing where to turn for help. Our Clinical Account Executives are available to support organization's supervisors, managers, and HR professionals.

Connect with us!

800-777-4114 | www.FirstChoiceEAP.com

