

Communication Tips for Talking about Secure Storage and Suicide

When having a conversation about secure storage and suicide, there are some skills that are important:

Open ended questions: Require an explanation. Cannot be answered simply with “yes” or “no”. These questions allow for the Veteran to explain more. *Example: “How did you cope with everything you have going on?” and “How do you store your firearms?”*

Reflections: Brief statements that show that a person is listening. *Example: “I hear you’re really struggling right now.”*

Validation: Recognition of the feelings that the person is experiencing. *Example: “Your situation must be hard.”*

Close Ended Questions: If you are unsure if a Veteran is thinking about hurting themselves ask directly to be sure. These questions require a “yes” or “no” answer. *Example: “Have you thought about hurting yourself?” And “Do you have a plan?”*

For more information and tips on having a conversation about secure storage visit:
<https://www.mirecc.va.gov/VISN16/a-veterans-guide-to-discussing-stores.asp>



Resources

“SUICIDE PREVENTION”

<https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide-prevention/index.asp>

“SUICIDE PREVENTION IS EVERYONE’S BUSINESS”

<https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide-prevention/docs/Toolkit-Safe-Firearm-Storage-CLEARED-508-2-24-20.pdf>

“TALKING TO A VETERAN WHEN YOU ARE CONCERNED”

<https://starttheconversation.veteranscrisisline.net/pdf/talking-to-a-veteran-when-you-are-concerned/>

“REDUCING FIREARM & OTHER HOUSEHOLD SAFETY RISKS FOR VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES”

<https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide-prevention/docs/Lethal-Means-Brochure-508.pdf>

A Veteran's Guide to Discussing Secure Storage to Reduce Suicide Risk (STORES)



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You Can Help Save A Veteran's Life

Conversations about suicide let other Veterans know they can talk about thoughts of suicide. Talking about suicide does not mean you need to solve all of their problems.

Asking about suicide can make another Veteran feel cared for and give them hope. It can encourage them to get professional help and possibly save their life.

If you think a Veteran is at risk for suicide talk about secure storage.

Facts About Veteran Suicide

- Veterans are 1.5 times more likely to die by suicide than non-Veterans.
- On average, a Veteran dies by suicide about every 85 minutes.
- Suicide is preventable - Not everyone who has thoughts of suicide will act on the thoughts, but the risk is present.
- Two out of three Veterans who die by suicide use a firearm to die.
- Of individuals who use a firearm for a suicide attempt, 90% die.
- A person in a household with a firearm is five times more likely to die by suicide than a person in a household without a firearm.

Understanding Suicidal Crisis

Suicidal crises are brief, i.e., the time between when Veterans decide to harm themselves and when they act on hurting themselves. For many, it takes as little as five minutes to act on a decision to attempt suicide.

However, the desire to want to hurt themselves often passes quickly.

If Veterans in a suicidal crisis cannot access what they planned to use to die by suicide, it is unlikely they would make a new plan during the crisis, e.g., if Veterans planned to use a firearm to die by suicide and they cannot access their firearm, they are unlikely to hurt themselves in a different way at that moment.

Using Secure Storage To Prevent Suicide

Secure storage is a part of suicide prevention. It reduces access to items that a person may use to die by suicide.

Using secure storage reduces risk for suicide by increasing time and distance between a person's decision to hurt themselves and what they would use to hurt themselves.

For example, a loaded firearm on a coffee table could be easily reached in a suicidal crisis. But if the unloaded firearm was stored in a safe and the ammunition was in the basement, it would take more time to get the firearm and load it.

The extra distance and time allows the crisis to pass and the Veteran to rethink acting on the suicidal thoughts.

Talking to Another Veteran About Secure Storage

When: A Veteran has suicidal thoughts, it is important to discuss secure storage to reduce the risk of suicide.

What: If the Veteran has a plan, focus on what they planned to use to hurt themselves. If they don't have a plan, talk at least about firearm and medications storage.

How: Talk with the Veteran to develop a secure storage plan that works for them. Small steps can make a difference.

LEAST SECURE

Store firearm **loaded** in the house.

Store firearm **unloaded** in the house.

MORE SECURE

Store firearm **locked with a cable lock** in the house.

Legally store firearm or ammunition outside of the house (with trusted other or firearm store).

MOST SECURE

Legally sell or give away the firearm.