

Why are Veterans Increasingly Committing Suicide? The Number of Suicides among Veterans Especially Female are Increasing: Why is that the Case?

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Abstract

In America more than 40000 people a year commit suicide and approximately 19% of that is suicides committed by veterans or soldiers still on active duty. The main psychological disorder connected to veteran suicides is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a condition suffered by people in high risk professions or by people who were exposed to a traumatic experience. A key difference between female and male veterans is the addition of MST among female veterans. Not only do female veterans need to battle with the possibility of PTSD, the chances that they have developed an additional disorder are much greater just because of their sex. Women who were exposed to sexual harassment during their service are twice as likely to commit suicide as other female veterans.

Keywords: PTSD; MST; Veteran; Veteran suicide

Introduction

In America more than 40,000 people a year commit suicide and approximately 19% of that are suicides committed by veterans or soldiers still on active duty. Studies show that suicides are more common amongst people who develop a sense of fearlessness in addition to having a psychological disorder. For example an individual suffering from a depressive disorder is less likely to commit suicide than someone who suffers from the depressive disorder as well as of the feeling of fearlessness from getting hurt. This offers us an insight into veteran suicides. Soldiers' main responsibility is to enter a dangerous situation, which teaches them to regard their wellbeing less than civilians would do. The suicide rate amongst male veterans is higher than amongst female veterans; that can be down to their role during their service - the majority of front line combat is still done by men [1]. Also in the US army 83% of active duty officers are male while 17% are female. But though male veterans are 18% more likely to commit suicide than male civilians, female veterans are 250% more likely to commit suicide than female civilians. Why is that

the case? Statistics show that women are in fact more likely to attempt suicides, but men are more successful at actually committing suicides [2,3]. Men are more successful, because they choose fire arms more often as their means, whereas women frequently choose to overdose etc. With female veterans, the uses of fire arms in suicides are more common.

Why are Veterans Increasingly Committing Suicide?

The main psychological disorder connected to veteran suicides is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a condition suffered by people in high risk professions or by people who were exposed to a traumatic experience. Its symptoms include flashbacks and nightmares of the traumatic event, and it can result in people feeling guilty, irritable and isolated. 27% of people who suffered from PTSD have attempted to commit suicide. But the main difference between female and male veterans is the addition of MST amongst female veterans [4]. Not only do female veterans need to battle with the possibility of PTSD, the chances that they have developed an additional disorder are much greater just because of their sex. A work environment constructed around possible sexual assault and harassment is believed to be one of the causes of high suicide rates among female veterans. Military sexual trauma (MST) is a condition caused by continuing sexual harassment which is unfortunately habitually present in the military. MST is associated with a number of physical and psychological health conditions. Such conditions include major depressive disorder, PTSD due to sexual harassment (which can occur in addition to the PTSD due to combat or other combat related traumatic experience), generalized anxiety as well as chronic pain conditions, obesity, addictions. According to an article published by NCBI, 21.2% women in the army suffer from MST; moreover, women who were exposed to sexual harassment during their service are twice as likely to commit suicide as other female veterans. In addition, 1.1% of men are subjected to MST, which is, considering the number of male soldiers in the US Army, a large percentage [5].

Pressure put on women to exist in the constant presence of danger, not merely of combat, but also of fellow soldiers, can take a very big toll to their mental health. Especially when the

general consensus states that if she rebuffs the abusive man the consequences to her career and wellbeing could be detrimental [3]. Female veterans have stated that their commanding officers advised them to disregard sexual offences as their complaints could damage their careers [6]. Consequentially, men in those situations of sexual power distribution revel in the appearance of transcendence and women become trapped in immanence [7].

We have to ask, why is there such a high rate of sexual harassment in the military? The relation between male and female subjects has been a discussion in philosophy and cultural studies from the begging of those disciplines. And looking at the military which is predominantly phallogentric, it is safe to presume that the modern woman accepts masculine values as the man becomes the role model for the strong and independent woman [8]. Simone de Beauvoir states that the power distribution contributes to the disproportionate relation between men and women: nobody wants to lose power, consciously or subconsciously; sexual harassment is an example of assertion of control [9,10]. To clarify, sexual assault and harassment do not happen because of sexual attraction, but because of an ulterior drive: power, control, rage.

A key point is that governments need to focus not only on suicide prevention, but also on the prevention of MST [11]. A number of support options are available to veterans (male or female) who suffer from MST, however it is an unfortunate condition that should not be as widely present amongst today's soldiers as it is. Currently the motives behind the sexual harassment in the service are merely speculative, with different fields of study presuming a number of reasons; for example power control or the effects of modern warfare on soldiers. None the less, sexual harassment crimes within the army should be dealt with a greater severity, as the effects are proving to be detrimental.

Unfortunately, PTSD is not as "easily" avoidable, but it can be managed, even though it is normally diagnosed as a lifelong, chronic condition. Studies consistently show that veterans who participate in psychotherapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, as well as actively work on overcoming their PTSD with the help of service dogs or by other means such as medicine, can cope with the effects of PTSD and can

have the chance to increase their life quality after the traumatic experience [12].

Suicides amongst veterans and soldiers on active duty are increasing due to a number of factors. Two of which, PTSD and MST, I have discussed here. No matter what the reason, it is clear that the current solutions in place are not providing enough support, or not the right kind of support. Hence it is vital that the support structures taking care of struggling veterans and soldiers evolves with the current demands and conditions of their mental states.

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