

# National Veteran Suicide Prevention

November 2021



Ohio has approximately 848,000 veterans, which constitutes the sixth-largest population of veterans in the United States. Some veterans serve for a minimum of two years (U.S. Army) while maintaining their required eight-year commitment as an active-duty member, a Reservist, or Individual Ready Reservist (IRR), while others stay until they are eligible for retirement. Some veterans experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideations. No one profile fits all veterans because each veteran compartmentalizes their experience differently.

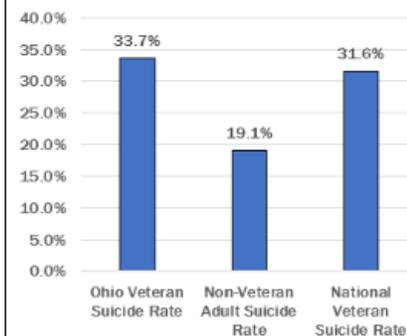
Veterans are at special risk for suicide.

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), 257 Ohio veterans died by suicide in 2019.

Those numbers are staggering compared to the state's non-veteran adult suicide rate (19.1) and the nation's veteran suicide rate (31.6).

How do we address suicide with our veterans? The most important thing is to ask, "Are you thinking of suicide?" The direct question is not the same as, "Are you

Figure: Ohio Veteran Suicide Data Sheet, 2019



thinking about hurting yourself?" How a veteran describes hurting themselves might not include suicide, so it's important to be specific. Asking the direct question can be difficult for anyone because we are usually worried about their answer.

Almost everyone wants to hear "No." However, the data tells us we should be prepared to hear a "Yes." Below are three tips to remember when navigating a conversation about suicide with a veteran.

## 1. Be Mindful About Asking Questions About Their Deployments

Although it is beneficial to hear a backstory about why a veteran is depressed or suicidal, it is essential to remember that talking about their experience can be traumatic. Since we naturally think in pictures, discussing a stressful combat operation could exacerbate their feelings and emotions. You want to make sure you are empowering the veteran by allowing them to tell you whatever makes them comfortable. Veteran conversations are challenging for people who do not have military experience and might not understand military terminology and culture.

Asking for clarity shows authenticity, but make sure your questions stay within the boundaries of what the veteran is discussing.

Do not minimize their deployment, lack of deployment experiences, or, if you have been deployed, compare your deployment experience with theirs. Even if your deployments were similar, it is essential to consider how their experiences made them feel. Comparing your experience with theirs can minimize their negative emotions and undermines their story. Instead, say something like, “I cannot begin to imagine how difficult that must have been for you. I am available to listen if you would like to discuss this more.”

## “EMPOWER THE VETERAN BY ALLOWING THEM TO TELL YOU WHATEVER MAKES THEM COMFORTABLE.”

### 2. Listen to Hear and Not to Respond

During difficult conversations, we sometimes want to respond to someone’s comment, question, or problem before they

have an opportunity to finish talking. This habit causes us to stop listening because we shift our focus to how we are about to respond. This habit usually causes us to miss critical information. Even if you have the perfect response, wait to respond. Sometimes, a veteran wants to know you are listening to them. You can simply say, “Thank you for listening.” This is a great way to develop rapport.

### 3. Avoid Why Question

In general, a why question makes people feel defensive, as if they’ve done something wrong. Instead of asking, “Why did you feel like that after your deployment,” change it to a how question: “How did you feel after your deployment?” How questions empower veterans because it allows them to express their feelings and emotions. They might respond, “I felt depressed after I came back home because I missed the guys in my unit.”



**For more information on how to have a conversation with a veteran about suicide, check out the resources below.**

- Ohio Department of Veterans Services: <https://dvs.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/dvs>
- National Institute of Mental Health: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/suicide-prevention>
- OhioCares: <https://www.ohiocares.ohio.gov/>
- Veterans Self-Check Quiz: <https://www.vetsselfcheck.org/Welcome.cfm>

#### Reference List:

1. Dates and Names Conflicts. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Website. [https://www.va.gov/vetsinworkplace/docs/em\\_datesnames.asp](https://www.va.gov/vetsinworkplace/docs/em_datesnames.asp). Published July 2021. Accessed November 1, 2021.
2. Ohio Veteran Suicide Data Sheet 2019. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Website. <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2019/2019-State-Data-Sheet-Ohio-508.pdf>. Published August 2021. Accessed November 1, 2021.