



## TALKING WITH A VETERAN IN CRISIS

You don't have to be an expert to ask if someone is going through a difficult time or having thoughts of suicide. If you notice changes in a Veteran's behavior or moods and you think they might be in crisis, it's time to respond. The simple act of having a conversation can help save a life.

### Here are some ways to approach a conversation with a Veteran who may be suicidal.

First, assess the situation to determine if the Veteran may be in **imminent danger**. Check to see if there are any harmful objects in the area, such as firearms, sharp objects, or lethal drugs. Those at the highest risk for suicide often have a specific suicide plan, the means to carry out the plan, a time set for doing it, and an intention of following through with it.

Asking whether a Veteran is having thoughts of self-harm or suicide may seem extreme, but it is important. Although many people may not show clear signs of intent to harm themselves before doing so, they will likely answer direct questions about their intentions when asked. **Remember, asking if someone is having suicidal thoughts will not give them the idea or increase their risk.**

However, some of those who are at risk may not admit that they plan to attempt suicide. In case the Veteran won't talk about it, be sure to look for warning signs in the box to the right.

#### Safety Issues:

If you believe a Veteran is at high risk and has already harmed himself or herself, you need to call local emergency services at 911.

- **Never** negotiate with someone who has a gun. Get to safety and **call 911**.
- If the Veteran has taken pills or harmed himself or herself in some way, **call 911**.

Veterans who are in emotional distress and are showing warning signs for suicide can be connected to the 24-hour **Veterans Crisis Line**: Call **1-800-273-8255** and **Press 1**, use the **online chat**, or **text to 838255**. Caring, specially trained responders are available to provide free, **confidential support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year**. Responders are available to speak to Veterans and their caregivers, family members, or friends.

### Warning Signs of Imminent Suicide Risk

- Acting recklessly or engaging in risky activities that could lead to death, such as driving fast or running red lights — seemingly without thinking
- Showing violent behavior such as punching holes in walls, getting into fights, or engaging in self-destructive violence; feeling rage or uncontrolled anger; or seeking revenge
- Giving away prized possessions, putting affairs in order, tying up loose ends, and/or making out a will
- Seeking access to firearms, pills, or other means of harming oneself

**If you and/or the Veteran are not in imminent danger, start a conversation to help the Veteran open up and to find out how you might be able to help. You can ask questions such as:**

- "When did you first start feeling like this?"
- "Did something happen that made you begin to feel this way?"

**When responding to answers from a Veteran, remember that simple, encouraging feedback goes a long way in showing support and encouraging help-seeking:**

- "You're not alone, even if you feel like you are. I'm here for you, and I want to help you in any way I can."
- "It may not seem possible right now, but the way you're feeling will change."
- "I might not be able to understand exactly what you're going through or how you feel, but I care about you and want to help."

**Even for Veterans who do not appear to be suicidal, it is important to direct them to resources to help them face mental health challenges and more.**

For more information about the Veterans Crisis Line, visit [VeteransCrisisLine.net](https://www.veteranscrisisline.net)

For more information about VA's mental health resources, visit [www.mentalhealth.va.gov](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov)

For access to more than 400 stories of strength and recovery from Veterans and their family members, visit [MakeTheConnection.net](https://www.maketheconnection.net)



## ANSWERING THE CALL

The simple act of talking with a Veteran by phone can help save a life. For a Veteran in crisis — whose emotional struggles and health challenges may lead to thoughts of suicide — these conversations can mean the difference between a tragic outcome and a life saved. When talking to a Veteran, listen for signs of distress or other clues that might indicate that they need immediate help.

### Determine if the caller is in distress.

1. Remain **calm** and **listen**.

2. **Ask the question:** “Sometimes when people are (upset/angry/in pain/etc.) they think about suicide. Are you thinking about killing yourself or someone else?”

**NO**  
NOT suicidal,  
homicidal, or  
in crisis

**YES**  
Suicidal, homicidal, or in crisis

3. Route caller to appropriate local resources.

You can find resources in your area, including local Suicide Prevention Coordinators and crisis centers, using our Resource Locator here:  
[VeteransCrisisLine.net/ResourceLocator](https://VeteransCrisisLine.net/ResourceLocator)

3. Assess whether the Veteran is at **imminent risk**, and determine if he or she has already inflicted self-harm or injured others or has an immediate plan to do so, with access to means.

### Signs of Distress:

- Emotional (crying, loud, yelling)
- Making concerning statements like:
  - My family would be better off if I wasn't here.
  - I can't go on like this.
  - No one can help me.

### If you are a staff member of a Veterans Service Organization, suicide prevention organization, or another type of support group:

- Notify your supervisor (or other staff) of the situation.
- Try to obtain the Veteran's phone number, name, and location.
- Have your supervisor (or other staff) immediately contact 911 for a safety check.
- Remain on the phone with the caller until emergency personnel arrive.

### If you work for a support organization or you are a friend, family member, or acquaintance of the Veteran:

- Try to find out where the Veteran is located and whether anyone else is nearby.
- Verify the Veteran's phone number and, if possible, the last four digits of their Social Security number.
- Explain** that you will conference a Veterans Crisis Line staff member into the call.
- Call 1-800-273-8255, Press 1.**
- Complete a warm transfer:** When the VCL responder answers, identify yourself, explain what is going on, and provide the Veteran's information.
- Inform the Veteran** that you will hang up and he or she is in good hands with the VCL responder.
- Make sure the Veteran is on the call with the VCL responder** before hanging up.
- If you work for a VSO, a suicide prevention organization, or similar, notify your supervisor per facility procedure or protocol.

For more information about the Veterans Crisis Line, visit [VeteransCrisisLine.net](https://VeteransCrisisLine.net)

For more information about VA's mental health resources, visit [www.mentalhealth.va.gov](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov)

For access to more than 400 stories of strength and recovery from Veterans and their family members, visit [MakeTheConnection.net](https://MakeTheConnection.net)