

# SafetyNet

This workbook is a conversation planning guide for talking to a Veteran about suicidal thoughts. This is not meant to take the place of a therapeutic relationship, or to address suicidal thoughts at a clinical level, but rather to assess the need for mental health resources, and ultimately address the barriers Veterans face in accessing those resources, so that they can receive appropriate assistance.

**Veterans are more likely to accept offered help than to seek help for themselves.**

**Even Veterans with close familial/spousal relationships are unlikely to ask for assistance.**

## When to use this guide

- You believe that a Veteran might be experiencing suicidal thoughts
- You are a family member or close friend of the Veteran
- And you are engaged, willing, and able to offer the Veteran help

## Workbook Steps

### Recognize Risks and Signs

- Identify known circumstances and behaviors
- Make note of specific examples

### Plan the Conversation

- Determine a time and place
- Organize your perspective
- Anticipate objections

### Enact the Conversation

- Use the conversation tips
- Come to an agreement

### Follow Up

## Other notable resources

- [mentalhealth.va.gov](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov)
- [nami.org/Find-Support](https://www.nami.org/Find-Support)
- [suicideprevention.osu.edu/prevention-and-intervention](https://suicideprevention.osu.edu/prevention-and-intervention)
- [veteranscrisisline.net/education/signs-of-crisis](https://veteranscrisisline.net/education/signs-of-crisis)

## Risks and Signs

Identifying the risks, and behaviors associated with suicidal thoughts and actions is the first step in starting a conversation with your Veteran.

People contemplating suicide often express feelings of guilt, shame, worthlessness, or that others would be better off without them. These statements should be taken very seriously.

### Choose all risks and signs that apply.

As you identify behaviors, note specific examples of when you have witnessed them.

These specific examples can be used later to help diffuse resistance. Use the last page if you need more space. Keep in mind, that while these items may indicate suicidal thoughts, they may also have other explanations.

### Risks

- History of abuse
- Trouble adjusting to civilian life
- Chronic pain
- Conflict with others
- Past traumatic experience
- Isolation from family
- Previous suicide attempts
- Recent loss or break-up

### Signs

- Agitation
- Expressed hopelessness
- Mood swings
- Violent behavior
- Lack of purpose
- Outbursts of anger
- Making final arrangements
- Deteriorating appearance
- Risk taking
- Giving away possessions
- Fatigue
- Social withdraw
- Sleeplessness
- Talking about suicide
- Changes in appetite
- Inability to concentrate
- Change in personality
- Sadness or depressed mood
- Loss of job or financial stress
- Absence of personal attachments
- Drug or alcohol misuse
- Impulsiveness
- Loss of interest in hobbies or activities

### Notes

## Pre-planning

### Creating a Conversation Plan

It helps to have a plan before starting a serious conversation with your Veteran. Use this sheet to gather your thoughts and plan for the conversation ahead.

Keep in mind that this section only includes your perspective. Once you speak with your Veteran and gather their perspectives, the answers given in this section could change significantly.

### Choosing the Time and Place

This is not an intervention, avoid group confrontations. Find a private time and place.

Avoid talking to your Veteran when they are:

- In a bad mood
- Busy or on a deadline
- Tired or distracted

Instead approach when your Veteran is relaxed and in a good mood.

## Define Your Perspective

What information/outcomes do you want from your conversation?

What actions do you want to see taken?

How will you know the conversation was successful?

How might your proposed action(s) benefit the person and/or your relationship with them?

What are some specific areas of problematic behavior you have witnessed?

## Be Prepared for Resistance

What objections can you anticipate prior to starting the conversation?

How might you overcome these objections?

### Encourage an agreement of understanding

The tools below can assist you in forming a mutual understanding through active listening.

- Ask questions: questions encourage a sharing of information and give you insight.
- Mirror: describe what you are noticing, suggest a possible reason for the behavior.
- Paraphrase: restate in your own words what you have understood from their statements.

Mirroring and paraphrasing allows them to acknowledge or correct any assumptions you have made.

## Conversation in Action

**Start with the heart**—make it clear you are a supportive participant in the conversation, not an accuser or threat.

**Share your perspective**  
Give specific examples, share facts and ideas in order to express your ideal outcomes.

**Explore their perspective**  
Ask questions and listen actively to receive facts and ideas on their ideal outcomes.

**Agree on an outcome**  
This may be the outcome you listed earlier or it may change during the course of the conversation

Ex. To re-engage with friends and family

Ex. To feel less angry

**Take action**  
Work together to determine the next steps for each of you after the conclusion of the conversation. Make sure to include a set time to follow up.

**Shared language and terminology** is important when it comes to conversations about suicide.

You want to express yourself in a way that is easily understood and will lead to engagement from your Veteran.

- Focus on Tone, Intention, and Shared Values to create a meaningful dialog.
- Avoid ambiguous terms or generalizations.

### Conversation Tips

Keep it conversational and friendly.  
Know where to seek help before you start the conversation.

Resources for your area can be found at:

[tinyurl.com/localcare](https://tinyurl.com/localcare)

Ask questions.

- “When did you start feeling like this?”
- “What happened that made you feel this way?”
- “What would help you not to feel this way?”

Show support.

- “You’re not alone, I’m here for you.”

Do not pretend to understand everything—it’s okay not to.

- “I might not understand exactly what you’ve gone through, but I care about you and want to help.”
- “I would like to understand that better, can you explain how you’re feeling?”

Make sure your Veteran understands not only that you will be checking back in with them, but when and how that follow up will take place.

Follow through on this step is crucial to building trust.

### Be direct in asking about suicidal intentions.

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

If a Veteran indicates they are suicidal or homicidal, seek immediate assistance if:

- They have already engaged in harmful behavior
- They are in immediate danger of engaging in harmful behavior
- They have a plan in place to engage in harmful behavior

## What Happens Next?

What actions have you agreed will be taken?

How and when will your follow up occur?

**“Remember, asking if someone is having suicidal thoughts will not give them the idea or increase their risk.”**

- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

# SafetyNet

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