



# Combat Exposure and Suicide Risk

- Given the link between combat and posttraumatic stress, therapies for PTSD, such as cognitive processing therapy and prolonged exposure therapy, may help reduce PTSD symptoms in combat

Veterans, which in turn may lead to a reduction in suicidal ideation.<sup>24</sup> However, not all PTSD symptom clusters confer the same risk for suicidal ideation and behavior.<sup>6</sup>

## Ways You Can Help

- For Veterans who have been exposed to combat, explore the nature and subjectivity of their combat experience, such as whether they were exposed to death or witnessed atrocities and how it made them feel. Consider the impact of these experiences in treatment planning and targeted interventions.<sup>4</sup>
- To get a sense of a Veteran's suicide risk, explore their perceptions of those experiences — whether they felt guilt, shame, or distress, as well as the extent to which they ruminate over those feelings.<sup>19,20,21</sup> A 7-item self-report measure that assesses wartime stressors experienced by combatants is the **Combat Exposure Scale (CES)**.
- If you are concerned, ask the Veteran, "Are you thinking of killing yourself?" Resources like the **VA S.A.V.E Training** to help are available.
- Explore the extent to which they see life as meaningful and their own life as purposeful, the extent of their social connections, their tolerance of uncertainty, and whether they practice mindfulness.<sup>13,15,22</sup>
- When appropriate for your Veteran patient, practice trauma-focused psychotherapies by using different techniques (e.g., visualization, talking, and thinking about the traumatic memory) to help patients process traumatic experiences.<sup>25</sup> Resources like VA/DoD Clinical Practice **Guideline for PTSD and Acute Stress Disorder** and VA/DoD Clinical Practice **Guideline for The Management of Major Depressive Disorders** are available.
- Encourage Veterans to utilize mobile apps like **PTSD Coach**, designed to help and support Veterans experiencing depression or PTSD symptoms associated with their military experience.

**There is no single cause of suicide. It is often the result of a complex interaction of risk and protective factors at the individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels. To prevent Veteran suicide, we must maximize protective factors and minimize risk factors at all of these levels.**

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# Combat Exposure and Suicide Risk

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