



# Leaders Suicide Prevention Safe Messaging Guide Implementation Guidance

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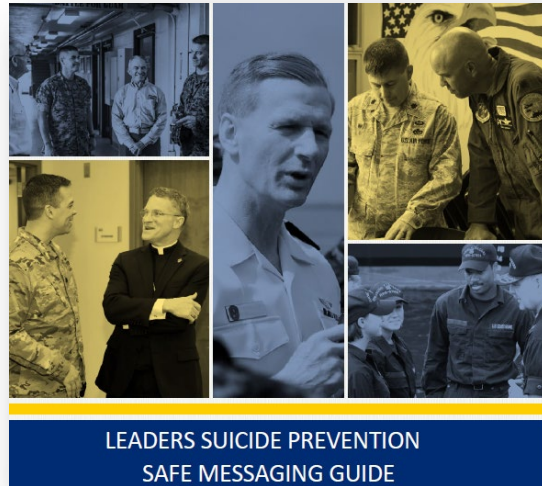


## Safely Communicating About Suicide Can Save Lives

Promoting safe communication about suicide starts with leaders. Leverage the *Leaders Suicide Prevention Safe Messaging Guide* (Leaders Safe Messaging Guide) to communicate safely about suicide and suicide risk across your military Service, installation, unit, office, and community.

Science and data from both the military and civilian sector, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, tell us that suicide can often be sudden and impulsive. Research shows us that staying connected and taking the simplest of actions – a text, a phone call, or video chat – can make a positive impact and potentially prevent a tragedy from occurring. The way we communicate about suicide – online or in-person – can influence perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors, such as how people view or decide to seek help.

The Leaders Safe Messaging Guide outlines several common misconceptions and facts about suicide. Knowing the facts gives us the tools to take life-saving steps and help our loved ones. As leaders, breaking down these misconceptions can significantly reduce stigma, encourage people to seek help.



Preventing suicide begins with **connectedness**. Research indicates that connectedness – or feeling connected or having a sense of belonging – is a factor that can reduce the chance someone will consider or attempt suicide. Having social connections and a feeling of belonging can be a protective factor against suicide. Sometimes, loneliness and feeling like a burden can increase the risk for suicide for some people. It is important for us to focus on how we can **Connect to Protect** the Service members and military families in our lives.

Learning to communicate about suicide by using objective language, avoiding judgment or assumptions, and encouraging help-seeking and showing support can help break down misconceptions and stigma, reinforce hope, foster help-seeking, prevent a crisis, and reduce the contagion of copycat suicidal thoughts and actions after exposure to information about suicide.

### *Who Should Use This Guide?*

Leaders at all levels across the Department of Defense should use this guide. Commanders to Chaplains, alongside those working in resiliency and health services, should use this guide to talk about suicide, talk safely about daily challenges and stressors that may affect someone's current well-being, and use safe language when reporting suicide online or to the media. Those working in or with public affairs should use this as a reference when reporting or communicating with the media about suicide in the military or advising leaders on their communications.



## Implementing Safe Messaging Across Communications

Leadership at all levels should use briefings, meetings, musters, trainings, engagements such as stand down opportunities, and other gatherings to introduce the [Leaders Safe Messaging Guide](#) and show how others in your Service/installation/unit/office should use this guide. Newsletter articles, fact sheets, electronic display systems, and other materials can be used to supplement the guide.

### Talking Points for Leaders

During meetings or stand downs, prepare a few talking points about this guide. Start your discussion with the importance of connecting with one another in efforts to address common life challenges, such as relationship, financial, or legal challenges, and to prevent a crisis from occurring. Seeking help is a sign of strength, and encouraging your team members to do so may provide them with the boost of confidence to seek help and potentially prevent a crisis.

Below are talking points for leaders to get started on the conversation:

- The DoD considers preventing suicide a top priority. Any death by suicide is a tragedy.
- Suicide is a public health issue and affects people from all walks of life.
- While we are all strong and resilient, none of us are immune from common daily stressors and challenges.
- You are not alone in your challenges. Whether you are going through challenges in your home life, experiencing financial or legal obstacles, or just need someone to talk to, there is help and support. There is hope, and help is available.
- Reaching out for support goes both ways. If you see someone in distress, feeling lonely, or overwhelmed, reach out and offer your support. Taking time to listen to someone, without judgment or assumptions, and encouraging someone to seek help – are all steps we can take in preventing a crisis from occurring.
- We're here as a team, and many of us may be going through similar challenges. We need to support one another and have each other's back.
- Suicide has been increasing across the nation and in our own backyard. We need to protect each other by connecting with one another.
- Don't bottle it up and keep it to yourself. To get ahead of these challenges, we need to ask ourselves – what can I do to help myself or others?
  1. **Check-in.** Ask if everything's alright or if they want to talk about something that may be bothering them. It's as simple as having a conversation over coffee, following-up, and talking through any challenges or stressors.
  2. **Offer your support.** Listen without judgment, encourage them to seek help, and offer caring words of hope.
  3. **Connect with resources.** Military OneSource offers non-crisis support - from legal and financial help to relationship and family counseling. Other options are



- talking to a Chaplain, Financial Counselor, or texting or calling the Veterans/Military Crisis Line (VCL/MCL) if you are having suicidal thoughts.
4. **Share stories with a positive message.** If you have had a similar experience and found support through any services or people you trust, share your personal story—our successful help-seeking experiences encourage others to talk about it and reach out for additional support.
  5. **Consult with an expert.** Reach out to a health care professional, such as a mental health counselor or a suicide prevention program manager, to ask about ways Service members and their families can reach out for support. There are many free and confidential resources, such as Military OneSource and VCL/MCL, that can help address challenges.

### Social Media/Websites/Online Content

Social media provides an opportunity to show support and direct people to reliable resources. Use the Leaders Safe Messaging Guide and refer to the sections on “Writing a Blog Post” and “Writing a Social Media Post” (pages 6-7) to communicate with positive language, use engaging images, and encourage your audience to reach out for help or support. Continuing the conversation on social media helps encourage more people to participate in conversations and reach for support. Connect online using hashtags #BeThere and #ConnectToProtect. If you see concerns on your social media, especially from those in your military community, approach the conversation how you would in person.

#### Example social media posts to family, friends, or coworkers:

Facebook/Instagram	Twitter
<p>This past year has been a challenging and unique time. Suicide has also been on the rise, and it’s been concerning me. It’s still important to connect with people, even virtually! Reach out to a friend you haven’t talked to in a while – we can all do something to support someone in our lives and prevent suicide. #BeThere and #ConnecttoProtect</p>	<p>Suicide has been on the rise, and it’s been concerning me. It’s still important to connect with people, even virtually! Reach out to a friend you haven’t talked to in a while. #BeThere and #ConnecttoProtect</p>
<p><i>[Directly messaging/replying to a friend]</i>            Hey, I saw your post, and I just wanted to ask if you’re doing okay? I am here for you if you want to talk.</p> <p>It’s okay if you’re not ready to talk to me about it – but there is confidential help if you need it. You can always call the Veterans/Military Crisis Line at 800-273-8255 (press 1), text 838255, or chat online at <a href="http://www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/chat">www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/chat</a>.</p>	<p><i>[Directly messaging/replying to a friend]</i>            Hey, I saw your post, and I just wanted to ask if you’re doing okay? If you’re not ready to talk to me about it there is confidential help if you need it. Call Veterans/Military Crisis Line at 800-273-8255 (press 1), text 838255, or chat online <a href="http://www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/chat">www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/chat</a>.</p>



<p><i>[Asking about suicide]</i> I can see you’re going through a difficult time. Is there a chance you’ve been thinking about suicide?</p> <p>It’s okay if you’re not ready to talk to me about it – but there is confidential help if you need it. You can always call the Veterans/Military Crisis Line at 800-273-8255 (press 1), text them at 838255, or chat online at <a href="http://www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/chat">www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/chat</a>.</p>	<p><i>[Asking about suicide]</i> I can see you’re going through a difficult time. Is there a chance you’ve been thinking about suicide?</p> <p>If you’re not ready to talk to me about it there is confidential help if you need it. Call Veterans/Military Crisis Line at 800-273-8255 (press 1), text 838255, or chat online <a href="http://www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/chat">www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/chat</a>.</p>
<p>Suicide in the military is devastating and tragic. If you know someone in our military community who is going through a challenging time or know they’re in distress, reach out to them. Ask them if they’re doing okay, listen without judgment, and connect them with resources. #BeThere</p> <p>Military OneSource provides all sorts of support, from financial or legal advice to relationship or family counseling. Call 800-342-9647 or visit <a href="http://militaryonesource.mil">militaryonesource.mil</a>. Or download the app!</p>	<p>Suicide in the military is devastating and tragic.</p> <p>Ask someone if they’re doing okay and Call Military OneSource for support – such as financial advice or relationship or family counseling - at 800-342-9647 or visit <a href="http://militaryonesource.mil">militaryonesource.mil</a>. #BeThere</p>
<p>We don’t talk about it much, but maybe we should because suicide is affecting ALL Americans of all ages. We need to start having more conversations and #ConnecttoProtect.</p>	<p>Suicide affects all Americans of all ages. We need to do more and #bethere for each other. #ConnecttoProtect</p>

Highlight the [Leaders Safe Messaging Guide](#) via a blog, e-newsletter, and/or a note to your team. Putting a spotlight on this resource may encourage someone to seek support and give them confidence to talk about suicide and any challenges they may be facing.

When writing a blog, e-newsletter, or a spotlight note on your website or online content, ensure you provide the following information:

- Determine the main point or key message of the article.
  - For example, focusing your story on connectedness may encourage people to stop, read, think about what that means, what it looks like, and why it’s important to connect with others through safe communication.
- Determine the five “W’s” – who, what, where, when, and why
  - One way to engage the reader and influence positive action is to share a personal story of hope, healing, and recovery. Sharing your personal story grabs attention, breaks down misconceptions and perceived barriers to seeking help, and encourages others to feel confident in reaching out to the resources available to our military communities.



- Add resources available to Service members, their families, and the broader military community, such as [Military OneSource](#), [inTransition](#), and the [Veterans/Military Crisis Line](#). Some other resources to consider are [Chaplains](#) and [wounded warrior programs](#).
- Add a link to the [Leaders Safe Messaging Guide](#) for additional information about safely communicating about suicide.

DoD provides the following language, which is Office of the General Counsel approved, to consider inserting at the end of news articles, press releases, publicly available oral statements, media slides, fact sheets, e-newsletters, blogs, website content as it relates to suicide prevention. Reporters should consider including this language if they wish to publicize resources available to Service members and veterans:

*Service members and veterans who are in crisis or having thoughts of suicide, and those who know a Service member or veteran in crisis, can call the Veterans/Military Crisis Line for confidential support available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Call 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1, text to 838255 or chat online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](#).*

*Because suicide is a public health issue and scientific research indicates that certain types of reporting can negatively impact vulnerable individuals, reporters covering this topic can visit [ReportingOnSuicide.org](#) for important resources on communicating about suicide.*

Refer to the [Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide](#) for additional tips and best practices for reporting on suicide for [online media](#).

## **Communicating About Suicide Loss**

Every death by suicide is a tragedy. Whether you or someone you know has lost someone to suicide, there is hope, support, and a way forward to cope with loss. Leaders can use the Leaders Safe Messaging Guide to better understand how to use caring and sensitive language while minimizing unintended negative impacts of deaths by suicide, such as suicide contagion (also known as imitation or copycat suicides). The guide is not a tool for providing counseling on loss.

To support leaders and postvention providers – such as non-clinical providers, first responders, and Chaplains – in providing support to families, Service members, and units impacted by a suicide loss, the Department published a [Postvention Toolkit for a Military Suicide Loss](#).





This Postvention Toolkit promotes healing among suicide loss survivors and minimizes any negative effects of exposure to a suicide death, including suicide contagion. Use the Postvention Toolkit to learn more about the emotional, social, and psychological impact of a loss to suicide and how to support the unit and family members impacted by a suicide loss (p. 34-44). For example, this Toolkit provides best practices for informing the unit of a fellow member's death by suicide and conducting unit sponsored memorial services.



## Working with Your Public Affairs Officer (PAO)

Coordinate with your PAO to address specific media inquiries, news stories, press briefings, and/or press releases. A briefing card is provided in [Appendix A](#).



## Appendix A. Briefing Card – Leaders Suicide Prevention Safe Messaging Guide

### OVERARCHING STATEMENT

*The Department is fully committed to preventing suicides in our military community – every death by suicide is a tragedy. The [Leaders Suicide Prevention Safe Messaging Guide](#) is developed specifically for leaders at all levels and across the Department of Defense. This evidence-informed communications guide equips leaders with the tools and resources necessary to safely and effectively communicate about suicide. Communicating safely about suicide can have an important impact. Using caring and safe language can break down misconceptions and stigma, reinforce hope, encourage treatment and help-seeking, prevent a crisis and reduce suicide contagion.*

### TOPLINE MESSAGES

- The health, safety, and well-being of our military community is essential to the readiness of the Total Force. ***Every death by suicide is a tragedy.***
  - ***Suicide is a complex interaction*** of factors that vary among individuals. Because there is ***no one “fix,”*** we are committed to a comprehensive public health approach to prevent suicide.
  - ***Suicide rates in civilian populations have been rising; the military is not immune to these challenges.***
- DoD will not relent in our efforts to prevent suicide. DoD is committed to addressing suicide comprehensively through a public health approach to suicide prevention.
  - This approach focuses on: (1) getting Service members to seek help and check in with each other, while (2) using simple safety measures and precautions to reduce the risk of suicide.
  - The Department is working to ensure Service members seek help sooner when they are experiencing distress and are prepared to watch for warning signs for themselves and others.
  - Beyond individual approaches, the public health approach also includes broader efforts, such as those targeted for our populations of greatest concern and developing initiatives to support military families.
    - For example, current efforts include programs/initiatives to reduce stigma/barriers to care, and increase help-seeking and means safety skills.
  - Safely communicating about suicide will help encourage help-seeking and self-care while promoting connectedness through a buddy or peer support system, reduce stigma and bias, and educate about available resources and support.
- The Leaders Suicide Prevention Safe Messaging Guide is developed specifically for leaders. This evidence-informed communications guide equips leaders with the tools and resources necessary to safely and effectively communicate about suicide.
- This Guide is an important tool because the way we communicate about suicide can influence behaviors – either positively by encouraging individuals to seek help or negatively by contributing to suicide contagion, or imitation suicide.
- Leadership is a powerful tool, and communicating safely about suicide can have an important impact. Using caring and safe language can break down misconceptions and stigma, reinforce hope, encourage treatment and help-seeking, prevent a crisis, and reduce suicide contagion.
- **Recent Actions:** The Leaders Suicide Prevention Safe Messaging Guide has been shared across the Department of Defense. How and what we communicate about suicide can positively or negatively shape the way Service members and their families view seeking help. We are encouraging leaders at all levels to use this Safe Messaging Guide and take every opportunity to brief their Services, Installations, Units, and Offices. Taking it further, we’re asking all Service members to use safe language across their communication and take the following steps:
  - **Check in.** Ask if everything’s alright. No one is alone in their challenges, and most likely, many people experience the same stressors and can begin to help or reach out to others.





- **Offer support.** Support may include listening without judgment, encouraging someone to seek help, and offering words of hope.
- **Connect with resources.** The DoD has many resources, including free and confidential services, such as the Military OneSource, which offers non-crisis support - from legal and financial help to relationship and family counseling. Other options include talking to a Chaplain, a mental health professional, or the Veterans/Military Crisis Line (VCL/MCL) if you are having suicidal thoughts.
- **Share stories with a positive message.** Often times, sharing similar experiences can provide support and comfort, knowing that they're not alone in their challenges. Sharing positive messages and how you've used resources or what type of support has helped you may encourage others to take action and reach out for additional support.
- **Consult with an expert.** Reaching out to a health care professional, such as a mental health counselor or a suicide prevention program manager, who can provide various support options to consider.
- **Working with the media:** When reporting about suicide as it relates to the military community, we ask that members of the media (or PAOs) take the following steps:
  - **Report suicide as a public health issue.** Suicide affects all Americans from all walks of life. Service members are not immune from the same daily challenges, and it's a nationwide public health issue.
  - **Include Resources.** Provide information on warning signs of suicide as well as resources.
    - Recommend including the following: *Service members and veterans who are in crisis or having thoughts of suicide, and those who know a service member or veteran in crisis, can call the Veterans/Military Crisis Line for confidential support available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Call 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1, text to 838255 or chat online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](https://VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat).*
    - *Because suicide is a public health issue and scientific research indicates that certain types of reporting can negatively impact vulnerable individuals, reporters covering this topic can visit [ReportingOnSuicide.org](https://ReportingOnSuicide.org) for important resources on how to communicate about suicide.*
  - **Use Appropriate Language.** Refer to the Leaders Suicide Prevention Safe Messaging Guide to communicate safely when talking about suicide. Avoid certain phrases and words that can be stigmatizing. Caring and thoughtful language can change misperceptions and pave the way for Service members and their families to get the help they need.
  - **Emphasize Help and Hope.** Sharing positive messaging, stories of recovery through help-seeking, and words of encouragement to seek help can be powerful, especially when they come from people who have experienced suicide risk.
  - **Ask an Expert.** Ask or verify with suicide prevention or mental health experts about facts on suicide risk and mental health.
  - DoD PAOs should be ready to refer reporters to an expert who is approved to speak about suicide risk and mental illness.
- **Next Steps and Other Resources:** Safely communicating about suicide is an essential part of DoD's suicide prevention goals. Creating an inclusive and safe environment for others to reach out for support and employ the resources available are important to our mission in preventing suicide across the Force.
  - To support leaders and postvention providers – such as non-clinical providers, first responders, and Chaplains – in providing support to families, Service members, and units impacted by a suicide loss, the Department published a [Postvention Toolkit for a Military Suicide Loss](#) available at [www.dpsomil](http://www.dpsomil). This Postvention Toolkit promotes healing among suicide loss survivors and minimizes any negative effects of exposure to a suicide death, including suicide contagion. Use the Postvention Toolkit to learn how to support the unit and family members impacted by a suicide loss.