



# Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Suicide in the Military

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As noted in the chapter on mood disorders, there is currently a higher rate of PTSD and depression in the U.S. military than in the general population. The rate of suicide is also higher in the military, a finding that has not been seen since the war in Vietnam. This has resulted in concerns by the military, government officials, and mental health professionals. A number of studies have been conducted to understand these troubling statistics.

In 2008, the RAND Corporation published a report on the psychological consequences of military deployment over the past decade, *Invisible Wounds of War* (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Since 2001, more than a million and a half U.S. troops have been deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. These troops have been deployed for longer periods and faced combat in smaller groups than troops in previous wars. Given the advances in body armor and medical technology, fewer deaths have resulted compared with Vietnam and Korea. However, what has become apparent is that these individuals have experienced mental health issues and brain trauma not initially apparent—referred to as *invisible wounds*. It is estimated that one-third of all soldiers involved in combat over the past decade have such an invisible condition including PTSD, depression, or TBI (traumatic brain injury). Further, 5% of these individuals display symptoms of all three. Given that this is a higher rate of PTSD and depression than that seen in the general population, it is surprising and disturbing that these military personnel only sought help from mental health professionals at about the same rate as the general

population. Roughly half of those who met the criteria for PTSD, depression, or TBI had sought help in the year preceding the RAND study. An important reason given for not seeking help was that the soldiers were concerned that the information would not be kept confidential and would hurt future job searches or military advancement.

Not seeking help for a mental condition not only has consequences for the individual himself but also for society in general. Often individuals with stress-related disorders show other problems such as substance abuse, as well as problems in their marriage and social relationships. For society, these conditions can lead to missed days at work, lower productivity, and even homelessness and suicide. However, there is potential to deal with these problems. The RAND report estimates that evidence-based treatments for depression and PTSD would pay for themselves within 2 years and save the country as much as \$1.7 billion in lost productivity annually. For both the individual and society, there is great value in not having the person become homeless or commit suicide. There is also increased quality of life for the individual that results from effective treatments of these disorders.

Based on their research, the RAND Corporation made four recommendations:

1. Increase the cadre of providers who are trained and certified to deliver proven (evidence-based) care, so that capacity is adequate for current and future needs.
2. Change policies to encourage active duty personnel and veterans to seek needed care.
3. Deliver proven, evidence-based care to service members and veterans whenever and wherever services are provided.
4. Invest in research to close information gaps and plan effectively.

**Thought Question:** What are some ways to ensure that our society treats the “invisible wounds” of war as seriously as the more visible physical wounds our military personnel experience?