



# Prevention of Suicide by Firearm:

## A Communication Guide for Military Leaders and Support Providers





## Who is this guide for?

- Suicide prevention managers
- Suicide prevention program coordinators
- Suicide prevention support providers
- Leaders and commanders
- Anyone in a prevention outreach or support role

**FIREARMS ARE THE PRIMARY METHOD OF SUICIDE DEATH FOR SERVICE MEMBERS.<sup>1</sup>**

## Introduction

Suicide is a public health issue that significantly impacts our military community. It can have lasting harmful effects on individuals, families, and communities as well as military readiness. The issue of suicide may seem daunting, and you may wonder how you can keep yourself and others safe. We know that firearms are the primary method of suicide death for Service members and family members.<sup>1</sup> However, research tells us that putting time and distance between an at-risk individual and a lethal means of suicide is an effective way to prevent death by suicide. A key prevention strategy, then, is to make suicide methods—such as firearms—more difficult to access when someone is at risk for suicide.


In this guide, you will learn to communicate strategically with Service members about the importance of personally owned firearm safety as a means of suicide prevention. This guide will provide you with the tools, information, and strategies to tailor your messages based on someone's background, life circumstances, and Service branch or rank. Lastly, you will learn about what motivates different groups of people in the military when it comes to safe storage of their personally owned firearms.




## How to Talk About Preventing Suicide Through Firearm Safety

Suicide by firearm is an important and challenging issue to discuss. Most people do not automatically equate personal firearm safety with suicide prevention. However, the goal is to save lives, which is something we all can agree on, and this shared goal can help you have difficult conversations with Service members about this issue. Use the four steps below to talk to Service members about personal firearm safety practices as a way to prevent suicide. These steps are guided by suicide prevention research conducted inside and outside of the Department of Defense (DoD).<sup>2</sup>


### STEP 1:

**Know who you are talking to.** Begin  by asking yourself what you already know about the values and beliefs of the specific Service members you are working with. How comfortable are they talking about issues related to mental health? What exposure have they had to the topic of suicide? Tailoring your approach to speak as directly as possible to the perceptions and lived experiences of your target audience will increase your chances of being effective.


### STEP 2:

**Address Service members' misconceptions about suicide and firearms.**  Understanding the values and beliefs of your audience can help you better address misconceptions related to (1) how and why suicide happens and (2) the effectiveness of personal firearm ownership for home and community safety. You should address any misconceptions about these two topics before beginning Step 3.

### STEP 3:

**Address Service members' personally owned firearm safety behaviors.**  After addressing misconceptions, it is time to target personally owned firearm safety behaviors. The goal of this step is to further educate Service members and increase their openness to having conversations about and practicing personal firearm safety (e.g., safe storage practices) to prevent suicide and accidents in the home or barracks and in other military facilities. It is not just about the Service member firearm owner—it is also about people who might access an unsecured weapon, including fellow Service members, families, and friends.

### STEP 4:

**Reinforce personally owned firearm safety behaviors.**  Once Service members have been exposed to new information about preventing suicide through personally owned firearms safety, it is time to reinforce that knowledge through other messages and avenues. The goal here is to make personal firearms safety practices the norm.

# Step 1: Know Who You Are Talking To

The key to successfully communicating is to *adapt your message* to the unique circumstances and life experiences of the Service members you are talking to. Knowing who you are talking to and what motivates them *matters*. Use the strategies below to guide your conversation with Service members, which are guided by suicide prevention research conducted inside and outside of the DoD.<sup>2</sup>

| WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT SUICIDE AND FIREARMS   | TURNING KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION  |
|---|--|
| <b>Protect Others</b>   |  |
| <p>Suicide is an incredibly important issue to Service members; however, they rarely see themselves as being at risk for suicide. Instead, they often identify as being “protectors” within their families or communities and are more likely to be motivated by the idea of preventing suicide in others.</p>  | <p>When discussing suicide prevention and personal firearm safety practices with Service members, it can be beneficial for <b>messages to focus on others</b>. This empowers Service members to look out for one another, their families, and their communities and may set them at ease when talking about firearms safety. Again, the shared goal is <i>saving lives</i>.</p>  |
| <b>Prevent Accidents</b>  |  |
| <p>Service members with personally owned firearms believe firearm safety is a very important step to preventing accidental discharges at home. They do not generally believe, however, that personally owned firearms safety is an effective way to prevent suicide.</p>  | <p>Not all Service members can see the connection between suicide prevention and personally owned firearms safety; however, <b>they agree on the importance of personally owned firearms safety to prevent accidents</b>. Effective messages should highlight best practices for personally owned firearms safety and continue to emphasize the relationship to preventing accidents and intentional acts of abuse or harm (in addition to suicide).</p> |
| <b>Cite Credible Statistics</b>   |  |
| <p>Service members find messages with statistics and citations from reputable sources to be more trustworthy.</p>   | <p>Messages to Service members should <b>include statistics and citations from credible sources</b> in order to build trustworthiness and emphasize legitimacy.</p>  |
| <b>Focus on the Facts</b>   |  |
| <p>Personally owned firearms and suicide are sensitive topics for Service members. Service members may be sensitive to the idea that someone, who is not a firearm user, is instructing them on how to handle their weapons. Additionally, many Service members know someone who has died by suicide, or they may have experienced suicidal thoughts themselves. Conversations about this topic may hit close to home and require the greatest sensitivity.</p> | <p>Due to the sensitivity surrounding these topics, <b>messages should focus on the facts and evidence-based recommendations</b>, instead of perceptions or opinions.</p>  |

It is important to note that at-risk individuals may not exhibit signs or symptoms of depression or suicidal thoughts. Part of understanding your audience is knowing the risk and protective factors for suicide. Knowing these factors is important for tailoring messages about firearms safety and may one day even help prevent a suicide attempt. Below are some common risk and protective factors for more information.

## RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION:<sup>3</sup>

### Risk Factors:

- Easy access to the lethal means to harm oneself such as firearms and/or medications
- Financial or legal problems
- Social isolation
- Relationship problems
- Interpersonal violence

### Protective Factors:

- Creating time and space to the lethal means to harm oneself such as firearms and/or medications
- Focusing on connections to friends, family, and community support
- Fostering supportive relationships with care providers
- Using positive coping and problem-solving skills

# Additional Audience Considerations

In addition to knowing the attitudes of your audience, it is important to consider their lived experiences as well. As a best practice, messages about preventing suicide by firearm should always be tailored to the social and environmental circumstances of those you are speaking to. Let's explore how audience considerations change the frame of reference.

## Service Members Living With or Without Family Members:

Who a Service member lives with tends to influence the manner and likelihood in which they practice personally owned firearms safety. In general, **Service members living with their family** are more willing to practice personal firearm safety to keep their loved ones safe from accidents. These Service members are likely to respond best to messages that mention the importance of preventing accidental death of their loved ones, regardless of whether or not they mention suicide prevention.

Meanwhile, **Service members who live alone or do not have roommates** may not see the need to regularly engage in personal firearm safety practices because they believe they are knowledgeable about firearms and are not at risk for suicide. For these Service members, it becomes all the more important to educate them about individual suicide risk, since they have no environmental motivators for practicing firearm safety at home.

## Service Branch:

Messages about suicide prevention and personal firearm safety should consider the unique contexts of each of the military branches. For example, outreach and communications for the Navy and the Marine Corps should consider the implications and limitations of life on a ship and the relative rarity with which these Sailors and Marines can access personally owned firearms, while deployed. You know the nuances and circumstances of your Service branch best. Use that information to your advantage in your communications approach.

## Active Component versus Reserve Component:

Messages should be framed differently for Service members of the Active and Reserve Components. Terms like "community" may have distinct meanings for Active Component, Reserve, and National Guard Service members.

For example, Active Component members who live among colleagues may regard their community as fellow Service members, whereas Reserve or National Guard members may consider their community as the places they live and work, as well as the people they interact with outside of military service. In order for Service members to "see themselves" in the messages you create, it is important to be thoughtful about how they might interpret seemingly generic words like "community" and ensure that the communications you develop are authentic to their unique experiences.

## Rank:

In some cases, rank is an important factor to consider when tailoring your messaging. The key variables impacting whether someone has easy access to personally owned firearms may vary based on rank. For example, a junior enlistee who lives in the barracks on an installation may not be allowed to keep a personally owned firearm in their quarters, whereas someone of a higher rank may be more likely to live off-installation or in on-installation housing where they may be allowed to do so. This may differ by location and Service branch. In other words, proximity to personally owned firearms may vary throughout the course of a military career, and it is important to craft messages that address these different experiences.



## Step 2: Address Service Members' Misconceptions About Suicide And Firearms

The biggest challenges you will face in encouraging Service members to adopt safe storage practices as a way to prevent suicide are the misconceptions that Service members may have about suicide and suicide risk and the potential impact easily accessible firearms could pose on personal, home, and community safety.

Understanding these misconceptions and using facts to address them is essential to *educating Service members* and to potentially preventing suicide by firearm. We know from a 2020 DoD survey that Service members reported that they believe advocacy from peers (80%) and superiors (66%) and that training on how to store a firearm safely (86%) and the benefits of doing so (79%) encourage safe storage.<sup>4</sup>

### MISCONCEPTION #1

**If you remove access to one lethal method of suicide, someone at risk for suicide will replace it with another.**

One of the most common misconceptions about suicide is that someone who wants to die by suicide will find a way no matter what. So, if one method is not available, they will find another way to harm themselves. In fact, a 2020 DoD survey found that 58% of Service members hold this misconception.<sup>4</sup> However, anything that disrupts an at-risk individual's plan, including not being able to access their chosen lethal means or method, can save their life. This is because people who have suicidal thoughts rarely have a backup plan they can easily act on if their initial plan is disrupted. Often, at-risk individuals are not thinking clearly enough to come up with a new plan on the spot. Additionally, these individuals generally do not remain in acute distress long enough to think through and implement a new plan. Research has debunked this misconception. If access to the preferred lethal means of suicide is limited, other means are generally not substituted.<sup>5,6</sup>

#### Messages to help address this misconception include:

- 90% of people who survive a suicide attempt do not go on to die by suicide at a later point.<sup>7</sup>
- Thinking about suicide (suicidal ideation) does not inevitably result in suicide. In fact, research shows that reducing access to personally owned firearms decreases the likelihood of a person dying by suicide.<sup>8,9</sup>

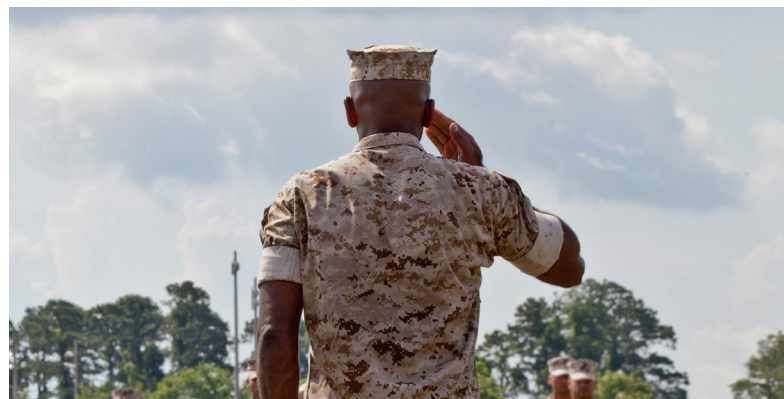
### MISCONCEPTION #2

**Suicide is always the result of long-term planning.**

Many people believe that the act of suicide is a result of long-term suicidal thoughts. Although risk factors for suicide can be long lasting and build over time, suicide attempts typically occur within a short window of heightened vulnerability.<sup>10,11</sup> This means that any barrier between the thought of attempting suicide and the act of suicide can *save lives*. A barrier can be delaying or removing access to the lethal means for harm, including personally owned firearms.

#### Messages to help address this misconception include:

- Research shows it can take less than 10 minutes between thinking about suicide to acting on it. Putting time and distance between a person at risk and a means for suicide is an effective way to prevent death. <sup>11,12,13,14,15</sup>
- Every second counts in suicide prevention. Securing personally owned firearms can give someone an extra moment to change their mind about suicide. <sup>10,11</sup>





### MISCONCEPTION #3

**Having a firearm in the home makes it safer and does not increase the risk of suicide.**

One reason Service members report owning personal firearms is for home safety. A 2020 DoD survey found that 68% of Service members said they believe having a firearm in the home makes it a safer place to be. Additionally, this same survey demonstrated that 56% of Service members believe that having a firearm in the home does not increase the risk of suicide.<sup>4</sup> The use of personally owned firearms for home safety, however, is *not* an effective means of preventing or reducing injury and property loss and does increase risk of suicide.<sup>10</sup> Despite this, the belief that having a firearm at home protects one's family and property is deeply engrained in society as well as in the military community.

#### Messages to help address this misconception include:

- Violent home break-ins are quite rare and have become steadily less common over the past 20 years.<sup>16</sup>
- Even though more and more Americans carry personally owned firearms each year, there has been no measurable effect on crime rates.<sup>17</sup>
- Having access to a firearm in one's home increases suicide risk by 4 to 6 times for everyone in your family.<sup>18</sup>

### MISCONCEPTION #4

**There is no relationship between personally owned firearms safety practices and suicide prevention.**

A 2020 DoD survey found that 66% of Service members said they believe there is no relationship between personally owned firearms safety practices and suicide prevention;<sup>4</sup> However, the risk of suicide is two to five times higher in firearm-owning homes for all household members.<sup>5</sup>

#### Messages to help address this misconception include:

- By safely storing a personally owned firearm, you can give someone an extra moment to change their mind about suicide and/or time for support to intervene.
- Safe storage of firearms is important to keep your family and community safe from accidents or incidents of intentional self-harm.



## Step 3: Address Service Members' Personally Owned Firearm Safety Behaviors

After addressing key misconceptions about personally owned firearms safety practices, it is time to target safe storage behaviors as a means of suicide prevention. This step is a key factor in continuously promoting the safe storage of personally owned firearms, both as an overall precaution and as prevention practice.

### Messages to help target personally owned firearm safety behaviors include:

- Research shows that securing personally owned firearms can prevent death by suicide by removing immediate access to lethal means.<sup>9</sup>
  - For example, store, lock, and separate your ammunition from your firearms in a locked safe.
- Every second counts in suicide prevention. Safely storing personally owned firearms can give someone an extra moment to change their mind about suicide.<sup>5,10</sup>
- Reducing access to a personally owned firearm decreases the odds of a person dying by suicide.<sup>18</sup>
  - For example, adding in layers with safe storage practices for your firearms builds in the time between thinking about suicide to acting on it. Safe storage extends the time available for a change of heart or for someone else to intervene.
- A firearm is a highly lethal means for suicide. The greatest risk for suicide by firearm is simply having easy access to a firearm.<sup>9</sup>
  - Did you know that one of the most lethal and common methods for suicide among Service members and their family members is via firearm? Approximately ninety percent of Service members who have died by a firearm used a personally owned firearm.<sup>1</sup> This makes firearm safety an important factor in keeping you and your family safe.



## SAFE STORAGE TIPS:

### *In the Home:*

Safe storage requires a firearm locking device that creates a barrier to unauthorized access or use, separation of firearms and ammunition when not in use, and/or safe storage in a secure, locked box. It is important to make sure that household members also understand the safety guidelines concerning firearms.

- Ensure firearms are stored safely and unloaded. Use a gunlock, trigger lock, or safe to secure a firearm inside the home.
- Store firearms and ammunition separately.
- Keep your firearm lock keys secure by using a combination lock box or storing them in a separate safe.

### *Outside the Home:*

Consider increasing firearm safety when you or someone in your home is at risk for misusing a firearm. Weighing the risks and benefits of storing a firearm outside of the home is an important step toward possibly preventing suicide or other accidents. In times of distress, consider outside options:

- Family members, friends, or neighbors
- Police department
- Gun shop
- Shooting range
- Armory
- Commercial storage facility
- Pawn shop

## SAFE STORAGE OPTIONS:



**Cable and trigger lock:** Prevents a firearm from being loaded and fired.



**Gun case:** Provides a safe storage solution that secures, conceals, protects, and legally transports a firearm.



**Lock box:** Provides reliable safety for a firearm.



**Full-size safe:** Allows you to store multiple firearms in one place.



**Safe Ammunition Storage:** Allows you to safely store firearms and ammunition separately.



## Step 4: Reinforce Personal Firearm Safety Behaviors

It is crucial to *continue reinforcing* personally owned firearm safety behaviors to emphasize the connection between these practices and suicide prevention. How to reinforce behaviors depends on what key Service member characteristics you identified in step one.



### Messages to reinforce personally owned firearm safety behaviors include:

- We know that firearms are the most common method of suicide death among Service members and military families. As part of a community, it is important to look out for one another in times of need. Help protect others from suicide by securing personally owned firearms.
- Keep your home safe. Lock up firearms and medications.
- Share safe storage options and tips with your peers, family, and community.

For more information about how to reinforce personal firearm safety behaviors, please refer to the download library at [www.dspo.mil/download](http://www.dspo.mil/download).



# Appendix

## Tools

### **DoD Safe Messaging Tools:**

#### **Leaders' Suicide Prevention Safe Messaging Guide**

[https://www.dspo.mil/Portals/113/Documents/DSPO\\_Leaders%20Suicide%20Prevention%20Safe%20Messaging%20Guide\\_FINAL\\_508.pdf?ver=tCBQzxbndLErGsAN7-S4\\_w%3d%3d](https://www.dspo.mil/Portals/113/Documents/DSPO_Leaders%20Suicide%20Prevention%20Safe%20Messaging%20Guide_FINAL_508.pdf?ver=tCBQzxbndLErGsAN7-S4_w%3d%3d)

#### **Defense Suicide Prevention Office – Talking About Suicide Online**

<https://www.dspo.mil/Portals/113/Documents/Social%20Media%20Reporting.pdf>

#### **Defense Suicide Prevention Office – Risks & Warning Signs: How to Help**

<https://www.dspo.mil/Portals/113/Documents/Risks%20and%20Warning%20Signs.pdf>

#### **Defense Suicide Prevention Office – Postvention Toolkit for a Military Suicide Loss**

<https://www.dspo.mil/Portals/113/Documents/PostventionToolkit.pdf>

### **Other DoD Tools:**

#### **Defense Suicide Prevention Office Download Library**

<https://www.dspo.mil/download>

#### **Defense Suicide Prevention Office Suicide Prevention Month**

<https://www.dspo.mil/spm>



# Appendix

## Resources

### Non-Crisis DoD Resources

#### **Defense Suicide Prevention Office**

Advances holistic, data-driven suicide prevention in our military community through policy, oversight, and engagement to positively impact individual beliefs and behaviors, as well as instill systemic culture change. Additional materials and resources can be found on the Defense Suicide Prevention Office website.

#### **Contact Information**

Web: [www.dspo.mil](http://www.dspo.mil)

#### **inTransition**

A free, confidential program that offers specialized coaching and assistance for active duty Service members, National Guard members, reservists, veterans, and retirees who need access to a new mental health provider or wish to initiate mental health care for the first time. inTransition services are available to ALL military members regardless of length of service or discharge status.

#### **Contact Information**

Phone: 800-424-7877

Outside the United States (international toll-free number): 800-424-4685

Outside the United States (collect): 314-387-4700

All calls are confidential and free.

#### **Military OneSource**

For non-crisis concerns, such as relationship, family, or financial challenges, Military OneSource provides 24/7 service to all Service members, including National Guard and Reserve members, and eligible family members. Arrange a face-to-face, phone, online, or video counseling session via the contacts below.

#### **Contact Information**

Phone: 800-342-9647

Chat: [livechat.militaryonesourceconnect.org/chat](https://livechat.militaryonesourceconnect.org/chat)

Web: [www.militaryonesource.mil](http://www.militaryonesource.mil)

Google Play Store: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=mil.dod.mcfp.mymilitaryonesource>

Apple App Store: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/my-military-onesource/id1532124387>



# Appendix

## Resources

### Non-Crisis National Resources

#### **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)**

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention is the nation's largest non-profit dedicated to saving lives and bringing hope to those affected by suicide.

##### **Contact Information**

National Office Toll-Free: 1-888-333-AFSP (2377)

Phone: 212-363-3500

General Inquiries: [info@afsp.org](mailto:info@afsp.org)

Web: <https://afsp.org>

#### **Give An Hour**

Give An Hour provides care and support for those who otherwise might not receive it by harnessing the skill, expertise, and generosity of volunteer mental health professionals across the country.

##### **Contact Information**

Email: [info@giveanhour.org](mailto:info@giveanhour.org)

Web: [giveanhour.org](http://giveanhour.org)

### National Crisis Resources

#### **911**

In an emergency, dial 911 or your local emergency number immediately. An emergency is any situation that requires immediate assistance from the police, fire department, or an ambulance.

##### **Contact Information**

Phone: 911

Web: [www.911.gov](http://www.911.gov)

#### **National Poison Control**

If you suspect a poisoning, contact a Poison Control Center right away, online, or by phone. Knowing is safer than guessing, and quick action could save a life. Help is available online, with the web POISONCONTROL tool, or by phone at 800-222-1222. Both options are free, expert, and confidential.

##### **Contact Information**

Website: [www.poison.org](http://www.poison.org)

#### **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a national network of local crisis centers that provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24/7. Your call is routed to the nearest crisis center in the national network of 150+ crisis centers.

##### **Contact Information**

Phone: 800-273-TALK (8255)

TTY: 800-799-4889

Web: [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

# Appendix

## Resources

### DoD Crisis Resources

#### **Veterans/Military Crisis Line (VCL/MCL)**

The VCL/MCL is a free, confidential resource that provides Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) support for all Service members, including members of the National Guard and Reserve, all Veterans, and their families, even if they are not registered with VA or enrolled in VA health care. The caring, qualified responders at the VCL/MCL are specially trained and experienced in helping Service members and Veterans of all ages and circumstances. If you, or someone you know is in a suicidal crisis, there is help – contact the VCL/MCL.

#### **Contact Information**

Phone: 800-273-8255, press 1

Chat: [www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/chat](http://www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/chat)

Web: [www.veteranscrisisline.net](http://www.veteranscrisisline.net)

Calling from overseas:

In Europe: Call 00800 1273 8255 or DSN 118

In Korea: Call 0808 555 118 or DSN 118

In Afghanistan: Call 00 1 800 273 8255 or DSN 111

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# Appendix

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## Stay Connected

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-  [twitter.com/DSPO\\_BeThere](https://twitter.com/DSPO_BeThere)
-  [instagram.com/dspomil/](https://instagram.com/dspomil/)
-  [defense.gov/Explore/Inside-DOD/](https://defense.gov/Explore/Inside-DOD/)