

# Adverse childhood and combat experiences may drive veterans' suicidal thoughts

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The rate of suicide among post-9/11 military veterans has been rising for nearly a decade. While there are a number of factors associated with suicide, veterans have unique experiences that may contribute to them thinking about killing themselves.

"Compared to their civilian peers, veterans are more likely to report having experienced traumatic adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as physical and [emotional abuse](#)," stated Keith Aronson, associate director of the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State and the Social Science Research Institute (SSRI). "Veterans also engage in life-threatening combat and witness the corollaries of combat such as seeing colleagues killed or wounded."

A recent study of nearly 10,000 post-9/11 veterans sought to determine if traumatic childhood and combat experiences were associated with suicidal thinking.

The research published on Feb. 24 in the *Journal of Community Psychology*.

Compared to veterans who had no ACEs or combat exposure (reference group), male and [female veterans](#) who had experienced one ACE but no combat were two-and-a-half times more likely to report thoughts of suicide. Females who experienced three or more ACEs but no combat were five times more likely to think of suicide, while males were three times more likely compared to the reference group.

"This data shows that veterans' suicidal thinking and mental well-being is influenced by factors that happen both before and during military," noted Daniel Perkins, principal scientist at the Clearinghouse and professor of Family and Youth Resiliency and Policy in the College of Agricultural Sciences who is also an SSRI cofunded faculty member.

Female veterans who were exposed to three or more ACEs and corollaries of combat were more than five times more likely and males were more than three times more likely to have thoughts of suicide compared to the reference group.

Female veterans who only were exposed to combat were nine times more likely to have thoughts of suicide, while males were four times more likely. Female veterans exposed to one or more ACEs and combat were more than eight times more likely to think about suicide than females in the reference group. Males exposed to one or more ACEs and combat were between two and five times more likely to have suicidal thoughts than male veterans in the reference group.

There was no association between suicidal thinking and exposure to the corollaries of combat irrespective of exposure to ACEs.

"Clearly exposure to ACEs and combat increase the odds that post-9/11 veterans will think about [suicide](#)," said Nicole Morgan, assistant research professor at the Clearinghouse. "Female veterans

appear particularly vulnerable to suicidal thinking and they likely need enhanced support and programs to decrease their suicidality and work to resolve their childhood and combat traumatic experiences through appropriate evidence-based treatment."

The study is a part of The Veterans Metrics Initiative (TVMI). The initiative focuses on understanding veterans' use and non-use of VA and non-VA resources designed to support healthy reintegration over the first three-years of military disconnection.

**More information:** Nicole R. Morgan et al, The interaction of exposure to adverse childhood and combat experiences on the current mental health of new post-9/11 veterans, *Journal of Community Psychology* (2021). DOI: [10.1002/jcop.22523](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22523)

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