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By Verdie Bowen

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## **We must continue to address veteran suicide: kindness, connection, intervention**

**JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska** — We all play an important role in helping to prevent suicide, but many people don't know what they can do to support our veterans or service members who are going through difficult times.

One way for everyone to do the best they can in order to support veterans and service members can be as simple as being a friend to those that you know may be struggling. Be kind to others in general, as we don't always know when someone is going through a difficult time.

### ***Be a friend.***

Helping those around you feel included and supported can make a big difference during challenging times, and a simple act of kindness may help someone feel less alone. Small actions of support—calling up an old friend, checking in on a neighbor, cooking someone dinner, or inviting a colleague on a walk—are thoughtful ways to show you care. Likewise, encouraging veterans and service members to take time for themselves and to focus on their own health and wellness can have an effective impact.

With the COVID-19 in our communities, it can seem more difficult to reach out than usual, but what we need to do is be a bit more inventive and intentional in contacting our veterans and service members. Phone calls and FaceTime/Zoom are good ways to contact people we know. A casual text to let someone know you are there can be encouraging as well. My sons who live all over the country get on line and play card and video games. Think outside the box and reach out.

### ***Next, start a conversation.***

Being there for someone can be easy, and it makes starting a conversation about your concerns less difficult. The most important thing is to show genuine, heartfelt support for someone going through a rough period in life. You may worry about what to say, or be concerned about making matters worse. Keep in mind, being there doesn't require special training; just a friend calling a friend works well.

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When talking about life crises, try to keep these best practices in mind:

- Remain calm
- Listen more than you speak
- Maintain eye contact/stay attentive on the phone
- Act with confidence
- Don't argue
- Use open body language/listen to what they say
- Limit questions to casual information gathering
- Use supportive and encouraging comments
- Be as honest and upfront as possible

***Know when a crisis needs intervention.***

Sometimes, while talking to a friend, you see signs the crisis has turned from casual conversation to something more serious. Don't be afraid, as this is when you are needed the most and this is when it gets real and you can help. They may require immediate attention from a medical or mental health professional if you hear or see them:

- Thinking about hurting or killing oneself
- Looking for ways to end life
- Talking about death, dying, or suicide
- Self-destructive behavior

If you notice these signs in a veteran, or a service member, please call the **Veterans Crisis Line** at 1-800-273-8255 and press 1; chat online at **VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat**; or text 838255 to get confidential support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

***Being a Friend Counts.***

I know that each of us working together can help calm the waters during this current crisis. In the past, I have asked our veterans to contact three old friends to connect, and today I am asking again. Please think about those you served with or know through other circumstances. Friends and colleagues you haven't heard from in a while.

If you find that you are the one overwhelmed with life, please don't isolate yourself. Reach out to the Veterans Crisis Line or call my office. I would also like to invite you to stop by my office for a cup of coffee or a meeting to discuss any concerns you may have with anyone on my staff or me. For directions to the office or if you just want to talk, give us a call. Our phone number is 907-334-0874 or toll-free 1-888-248-3682. I believe together we can change veteran suicide one connection at a time.

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