REDUCING SUICIDE:
THE INTERSECTION OF EMPIRICISM
AND CLINICAL WISDOM

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Suicidality and U.S Veterans

- Increased risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors among military personnel and Veterans
- Suicide rates among OEF/OIF Veterans may be elevated as compared to Veterans from earlier cohorts.\(^1\,^2\)

\(^1\)Kang & Bullman, 2008, \(^2\)McCarthy et al., 2009
What accounts for elevated risk among service members?

- Intensely stressful warzone experiences are associated with later suicidal ideation, attempts and death. \(^1, 2, 3, 4\)

  * Include:
    * Combat experiences, exposure to aftermath of battles, act of killing in combat
    * Sexual Traumas
    * Interpersonal stressors in aftermath of the battle including general (nonsexual) harassment

Belik, et al., 2009; Lemaire & Graham, 2010; Maguen, et al., 21011; Pietrzak, et al., 2010
Mental health diagnoses

- One of the most common risk factors for suicide in OEF/OIF studies\(^1,2\)
  - PTSD
  - Depression
  - Alcohol misuse

- Associations between deployment stressors and suicidal ideation can typically be accounted for by mental health symptoms

\(^1\text{Kang and Bullman, 2008, }^2\text{Pietrzak, et al., 2010}\)
Female Veterans

- Few studies examining gender differences in suicidality
- Women make up 7.5% of the Veteran population (1,800,000)\(^1\)
- These numbers are expected to grow to 14% of the Veteran population by 2030.\(^2\)
- OEF/OIF women Veterans are likely to be exposed to combat\(^3\)
- We need to understand gender-specific pathways to suicidality.

\(^1\)Department of Veteran Affairs, 2010; \(^2\)Foster & Vince, 2009; \(^3\)Street Vogt, Dutra, 2009
Suicide Among Veterans: Gender Issues

- General population: Women are 3x more likely to attempt suicide than men, but men are 4x more likely to die by suicide.¹

- Gender differences in suicide rate are true among Veterans as well, but may be less pronounced
  - Familiarity with firearms among female Veterans
  - Female Veterans more likely to have experienced a trauma

Maris et al., 2000
Suicide Among Veterans: Gender Issues

  - Possible “hidden epidemic” of self-inflicted death among women who served in the US military
  - Female Veterans of all age groups had an increased risk of completed suicide compared to non-Veterans
Added burden of sexual trauma and suicide: General Population

- General population: those endorsing sexual victimization are 8x the risk for lifetime suicidal ideation

- After controlling for pre-existing psychiatric diagnoses, the rate of suicide among those who experienced a sexual victimization was 14x greater than those who did not.

1Bebbington, et al., 2009
Sexual Trauma and Suicide: General Population

- Sexual assault and suicidal gestures versus attempts (Nock and Kessler, 2006)
  - Participants who endorsed multiple incidents of rape were about 3 times more likely to make a suicide attempt than participants who endorsed one incident
  - Potential dose response relationship?
Sexual Trauma and Suicide: General Population

- Studies suggest strong evidence of an association between sexual assault and suicidal behavior in general population.

- Studies are limited due to difficulties in studying these two constructs together
  - Differential definition of events
  - Underreporting
Added burden of sexual trauma and suicide: Veterans

- Evidence that there is increased risk of suicidal behavior among military personnel and Veterans that experience sexual trauma
- Studies need to be replicated in other samples (i.e., large gender-stratified sample of US military/Veterans)
- More thorough assessment of sexual trauma events
Sexual Trauma and Suicide: Veterans

- For male Veterans, mental health symptoms (PTSD, depression, alcohol use) explained all observed associations between deployment experiences and suicidal ideation.

- The same pattern was found for women with one exception:
  - Among female Veterans, sexual harassment was independently associated with suicidal ideation, even after accounting for mental health symptomatology.
  - Only deployment experience for which this was true.

\(^1\)Gradus et al., 2013
Kim’s story

- Kim appeared in the VA for treatment for PTSD.
  - 27 year old
  - 2 tours in Iraq
  - Only female in her unit
  - Significant combat exposure
  - Military Sexual Trauma
Clinical Considerations

- Assessment of premorbid functioning
- Presence of mental health diagnoses
- Other contributing factors (sleep, pain)
- Role of unit cohesion
- Current level of social support
- Continued assessment and therapeutic choices
Veterans carry a high burden including exposure to intensely stressful, combat-related events. These exposures and experiences are related to higher prevalence of mental health diagnoses. These, in turn, are risk factors for increased suicidality.

Although somewhat limited, research suggests that suicidal behaviors are potential sequelae of sexual trauma.

Based on general population literature and emerging Veteran literature, increased risk may be found among Veterans who experience multiple sexual traumas.

Additional research is needed to determine if there are gender differences in the association between sexual trauma and suicide.