



Meeting the unique mental health needs of veterans

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

The statistics were shocking. A 2014 study by the Veterans Administration (VA) found that 22 veterans were taking their own lives each day in the U.S. A follow-up study published last year found that although suicides among veterans were decreasing, there was still an average of 20 veteran suicides each day. The latter study also found that while veterans accounted for only 8.5 percent of the U.S. adult population in 2014, they accounted for 18 percent of all deaths by suicide.

While it can be easy to assume veterans' experiences in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – in which thousands of young adults experienced physical and psychological injuries – were driving these tragic numbers, it is more complicated than that. In fact, the 2016 report found the majority of veterans dying by suicide – 65 percent – were aged 50 and older. The VA concluded the overall risk for suicide among veterans was 21 percent higher than for civilian adults.

Psychologists have long known that mental health disorders, including major depression and other mood disorders, are associated with an increased risk of suicide. And although not everyone that attempts suicide has mental illness, the vast majority – by some estimates, 90 percent – of individuals that complete suicide suffer from a mental health disorder.

There may be several conclusions that can be drawn from these reports, but a primary one is that many veterans are in need of mental and other behavioral health services. In addition, it would seem, many veterans are not receiving the services they need to successfully deal with the psychological effects of their military service – whatever those may be and however they occurred.

As the number of veterans in need of mental health services – and healthcare services in general – surged with the wars in the Middle East, the Veterans Administration found itself overwhelmed. In order to help meet the needs of these and other veterans, the VA began partnering with local healthcare providers.

In Georgia, the Atlanta VA Medical Center partners with Highland Rivers Health to provide behavioral health services for veterans – and Highland Rivers has become one of the largest providers of these services to veterans in the state.

As a VA partner, Highland Rivers is able to provide services to veterans who have VA healthcare benefits. But all of our services are available to veterans, even those that do not have VA benefits or are uninsured.

Highland Rivers has worked to tailor our services to the unique needs of veterans as well, and several of our therapists are STAR-certified behavioral health providers (meaning they have completed intensive training developed by the Center for Deployment Psychology to meet the deployment-related psychological needs of veterans and their families).

Currently, Highland Rivers provides a variety of services specifically for veterans, including outpatient counseling for PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), prolonged exposure and military sexual abuse. We also offer PTSD and veteran peer support groups, so veterans can learn from others who have had similar experiences and can relate to their challenges.

In addition, Highland Rivers provides crisis intervention and stabilization, veteran-specific supportive housing assistance, supported employment, substance use treatment and community support services, among other programs.

Although there is no easy solution to the problem of veteran suicide, it is critical that veterans receive the mental health treatment services they need to help them recover from trauma, depression, mood disorders or substance use disorders associated with their service.

Highland Rivers believes that recovery is always possible and that no veteran should feel the only choice is to end his or her life. Highland Rivers is close by and ready to help. For an appointment, call us at (800) 729-5700 or speak with your VA case manager about receiving services from Highland Rivers Health.