Black Women Inspire Military Suicide Prevention Efforts

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African-American women's sense of community and their candid communication with each other may mean the difference between life and death for war vets at risk of suicide, according to a story reported by The National Journal.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that the suicide rate for white men in the general U.S. population, from 2005 to 2009, was about 26 suicides per 100,000 people as compared with black women's nearly three suicides for the same number of individuals—the lowest rate of any group surveyed. (American Indian and Alaskan Native males had the highest suicide rate.)

In addition, while CDC statistics indicate that the suicide rate can vary depending on gender, race and ethnicity, active-duty U.S. military service persons or veterans seem to be more at risk of suicide. (About 18 veterans kill themselves every day, according to a Veterans Affairs spokesman.)

To reverse the suicide trend among veterans and individuals in active-duty forces, health administrators are looking at the social support dynamics within groups with relatively few suicides. Women—particularly black women—provide each other with social support and encouragement and speak honestly with one another, said Jan Kemp, RN, PhD, the mental health director for suicide prevention at the Veterans Affairs.

One organization that has been trying to cultivate social support networks of peers and mental health professionals for veterans and active-duty troops is called the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS). Its national director of suicide education and outreach is Kim Ruocco, the wife of a soldier who committed suicide just before he was scheduled to be redeployed to Iraq. Ruocco said shame and stigma stopped her husband from seeking immediate treatment. Now, TAPS works to provide a lifesaving social support network to the loved ones of veterans and active duty personnel who die by suicide or in combat.

If you're a veteran, or the family member of a former soldier, help is available. Call 800.273.8255 and press 1 to talk with a VA responder.

Of course, women of all races and ethnicities can experience trauma, depression and suicidal thoughts. Click here to read about how domestic violence can lead to post-traumatic stress

disorder (PTSD)—a condition that's often linked to trauma from military service.

And click here to read about Shoshana Johnson, the nation's first black female prisoner of war.

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