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Program Evaluation and Research Unit

# Combat Veterans, Killing and Suicide

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# Learning Objectives

**By the end of this module, you will be able to do the following:**

- Examine the lived experience of a combat veteran
- Define how specific types of combat exposure impact suicidal ideation and suicidal attempt
- Describe how killing in combat impacts suicidal ideation and suicidal attempt
- Describe healing efforts for those with combat exposure



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# Combat-In the moment

- “During battle, the heart beats too hard. Adrenaline pumps too fast. Muscles and minds strain to perform beyond capacity. Sensations and feelings bombarded too quickly to be processed. This extreme state might last seconds or hours, days or months. Then suddenly it stops.”



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# Combat Veteran

- Difficult to put into words how war and combat impacts someone:
  - Unrecognizable to loved ones and family members
    - ...”they came home different”
  - Moral Injury
    - Shifting of one’s own moral compass
  - Burdened with knowledge that most do not possess
    - Combat veterans have seen the worst and best of humanity
  - Extreme need to remember fallen comrades and those that died



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# Impact of specific combat on SI/SA

- Research was focused on better understanding how specific combat experiences impacted Suicidal Ideation and Suicidal Attempts (SI/SA)
  - Data were analyzed from The National Health and Resilience in Veterans Study (NHRVS), a nationally representative study of 3157 U.S. veterans conducted in 2011.
  - Five Step process sifted through variables such as age, race, gender, sociodemographic and lifetime trauma
  - Results showed combat experiences that involved direct exposure to death, killing, or grave injury exhibited the strongest associations with suicidal behavior



# Combat Exposure Scale

- Combat Experiences Scale (CES) is a 33-item measure that assesses deployment-related experiences
- Participating in patrols and coming under enemy fire had a negative impact on SI/SA
- However, killing and witnessing death had showed a significant increase in SI/SA, over and above sociodemographic characteristics and lifetime trauma burdens

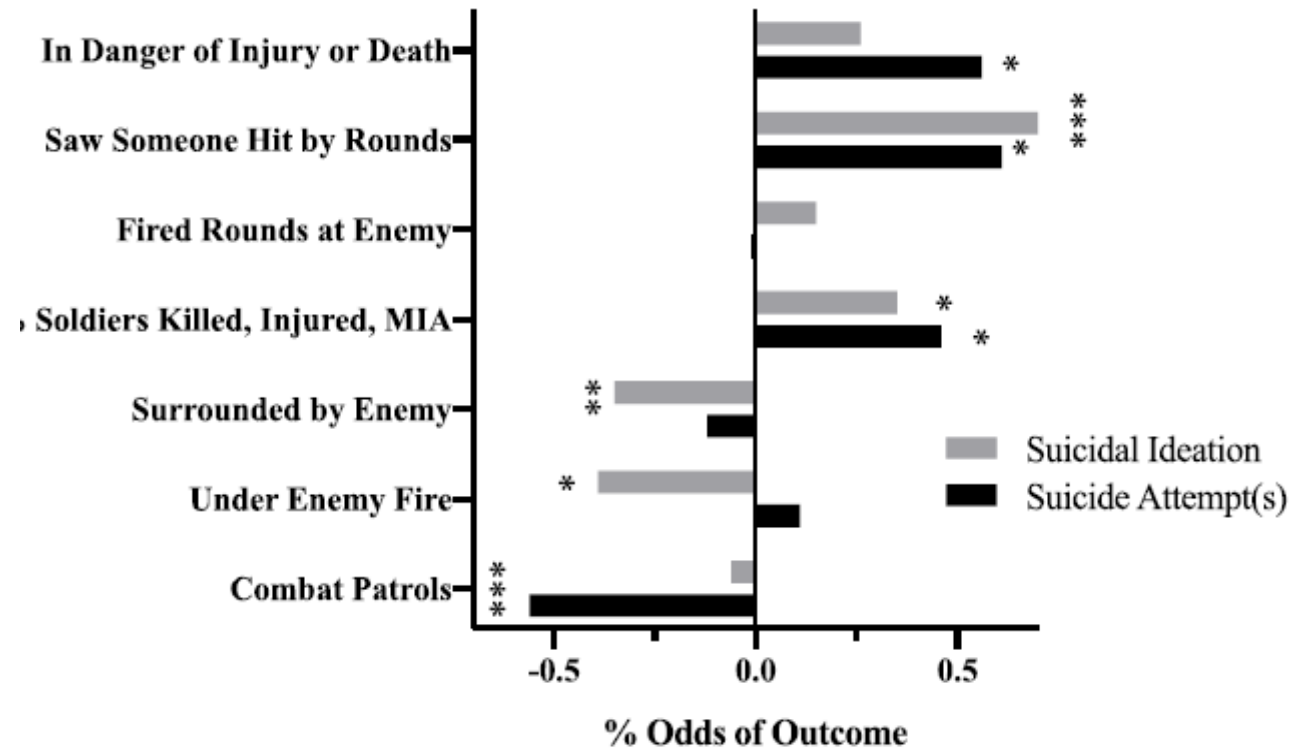


# Combat Exposure Scale- Sample Questions

- Did you ever go on combat patrols or have other dangerous duty?
- Were you ever under enemy fire?
- What percentage of the soldiers in your unit were killed (KIA), wounded or missing in action (MIA)?
- How often did you fire rounds at the enemy?
- How often were you in danger of being injured or killed (i.e., being pinned down, overrun, ambushed, near miss, etc.)?



# Odds of SI/SA



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# Research Limitations

- Data used was self-reported, thus, researcher are unable to verify stories or veteran status
- Questions were asked about lifetime suicidal behavior, not just post combat exposure
- Majority of respondents were from Vietnam Era, 48.4%, and older white males
- This investigation examined non-fatal suicides rather than completed suicides



# Why is this important?

- Those screening for SI/SA should understand impact of combat exposure and how different experiences impact risk
- Killing and witnessing of death has serious consequences on veterans' mental health and moral injuries, thus the importance of comprehensive screening during diagnostic intake
- Firearm safety and lethal means accessibility may be warranted in certain circumstances



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# Healing from combat exposure

- War wounds require a healing of the soul. Outside of traditional talk therapies and psychological remedies, here are few other paths:
  - Acceptance of warrior nature
  - Purification of the soul
  - Community welcoming home for shared sacrifice
  - Storytelling
  - Spiritual and existential work



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# Healing from combat exposure

“Combat survivors can evolve from being ravaged by disturbance, illness, and disorder into returned elder warriors carrying an honorable wound in meaningful service, from destroyer to creator and preserver, from one who has been isolated, neglected, excluded to one who serves for life in the center of the community as elder and teacher, carrying wisdom and blessings for all.”



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