

Military OneSource Podcast — After a Suicide

Episode transcript:

Intro voiceover:

Welcome to the Military OneSource podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department, with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast, I'm Bruce Moody.

We're going to talk about suicide in this episode. The Defense Department has two online courses that offer support and guidance to those affected by suicide. And we'll get to that, but I really want to start off at the top by saying that if you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available.

You can simply call or text 9-8-8 and then press one. It's the military crisis line. It's free; it's absolutely confidential. It's available to all service members and family members, including members of the National Guard, the reserves and veterans, even if you're not enrolled in VA benefits or health care. So, we'll go ahead and put the crisis line information in the program notes of this episode.

And then with that, let's get into talking about the actual courses that have been recently made available to the community. And we'll do that with our guests. My guests today are Lisa Valentine, who is with the Defense Department's Casualty, Mortuary Affairs, and Military Funeral Honors Program, and Dr. Andrew Moon, and he is with the Defense Suicide Prevention Office.

To begin talking about this course, I want to welcome our guests and just ask them to explain who they are and their backgrounds because each of our guests today had a lot to do with these courses. So, Lisa, let's just begin with you. Welcome to the podcast and tell us a little bit about yourself.

Lisa Valentine:

Thank you, Bruce. Well, I myself I'm an Army veteran. I retired; I have 23 years. And then my work in the Army led me to the work that I do today, which is Casualty, Mortuary Affairs, and Military Funeral Honors. And one of the objectives as the program manager is we want to ensure that we have resources available for surviving family members, especially those whose service member died by suicide. And also, to have tools available to train service providers who assist those surviving family members.

Bruce:

Well, thank you for your service and thank you for the work that you do. I'm glad to have you with us on the podcast. Dr. Moon, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself? Welcome to the podcast.

Andrew Moon:

Thank you, Bruce. Andrew Moon here, I am a clinical psychologist by training. I've done most of my career within the federal government as a clinical psychologist. I have a background in working with individuals who've experienced trauma. I also transitioned into my role here with Defense Department as the lead for education around suicide prevention, very similar to the role I carried with the VA for a number of years as lead for education in their national suicide prevention program. So, coming at it with a clinical eye and an eye toward how we better educate those who we need to bring into the fold.

Bruce:

Wonderful. We appreciate the work that you do. Let's get into the course itself. Lisa, why don't you tell us? There are actually two courses. They're offered through MilLife Learning, and we'll put a link in our program notes. People can just click through and see it, but Lisa, if you could begin and tell us about these courses.

Lisa:

Sure. Bruce, our first class that we have, our first course is called "After a Suicide." And this course is for everybody who's been exposed to a suicide, whether you know the person or you don't know the person, but it's anyone who's been exposed to a suicide. And this course provides compassionate support and guidance, and it covers communication techniques and ways to stay connected to a support system or to even get connected to a support system. And it offers reminders about how those who are impacted can maintain their physical and their mental health during such a difficult time. And this course, it launched in September 2021 during Suicide Prevention Month.

After that, we created a second course, which is "After a Suicide: Walking Through Providing Support." And this particular course is geared toward service providers to help them gain a greater awareness of the complicated nature of suicide and how to establish a rapport with and support suicide loss survivors, as well as offer tools to help protect against the heavy impact of a suicide death. And this is our latest course that we launched, which was in August 2022.

Bruce:

Lisa, what drove the need for these courses?

Lisa:

From our standpoint, the need of this course came from survivor feedback for what we received when we meet with survivors whose loved ones died by suicide. And then I want to pass the floor to Dr. Moon to talk a bit more.

Andrew:

Sure. Thank you, Lisa. Yeah, definitely stemming from a survivor perspective. I'd like to pull back a little bit and talk about what this course really engages in, and that's something called postvention. And postventions are interventions that we can engage with those who are impacted directly by suicide. And in postvention at its core is suicide prevention.

Data that we have from the Military Suicide Research Consortium says that with each death by suicide, about 135 people are exposed. And within that, we know exposure to a suicide death actually increases your own risk. And so, good interventions, good work in postvention is great work in suicide prevention. And the Defense Department is committed to providing these resources for our service members, their families and anyone who's been exposed to a death by suicide.

Bruce:

When you talk about a suicide and the number of people exposed to that suicide, I think in terms of a unit. I guess my question is, are these courses something that an NCO might benefit from taking?

Andrew:

Absolutely. The courses have two aims. The first course is really aiming at caring for yourself and caring for people in your life who are directly exposed. So really helping say that particular NCO if they were close to that service member or had a close dynamic or relationship, that the first course really would be helping them work through their own process of grief and understanding.

And then the second course is really focused on how that NCO can support others within the unit, within leadership, how they can support those who are grieving, how they can have compassionate, empathetic conversations, and really make sure that those people have what they need to stay connected.

Bruce:

I'm glad to hear that because I've been traveling around and I've been meeting with leaders and it is frankly amazing what our NCO community is doing to maintain the integrity, the strength and the readiness of the individual, and, of course, the family. So that's really so very, very critical. When we talk about the effects of dealing with a death by suicide on those who have left behind, what are the effects that we're looking at?

Andrew:

That's a great question there. The effects are, I'm going to say complicated and varied. Each loss will bring about different things in different individuals. But, in general, beyond the immediate response to loss, research tells us that suicide loss survivors are at a greater risk for anxiety related disorders, potentially post-traumatic stress responses and depression, complicated grief process and, as I mentioned, suicide

themselves. The impacts are going to be potentially more intense in a suicide survivor situation.

Bruce:

And, of course, there's also the issue of stigma. And when we're looking at the stigma that is attached to a death by suicide, how are survivors able to overcome that?

Andrew:

That is a really important question. Stigma and suicide have been long associated with each other, and it can bring about a sense of shame or a brokenness. And within that, it can maybe push that loss survivor into disconnection, a removal from their community, not understanding how to gain support or where they can gain support. For many, they've been taught that even mentioning suicide is taboo and frowned upon. And again, that can be particularly hard and isolating. It can help just by starting to get a better understanding of your own thoughts on suicide and finding out what feels helpful and comforting and less shaming for you personally. And then once you feel confident in that, it's finding resources that align with those personal views. Finding community, spiritual leaders, family members, peers that support your understanding of suicide and your complicated grief process. And they can help you think more deeply and support you in your journey of grief.

Bruce:

The range of emotions at play here and thought processes that cascade from a suicide go into so many different directions. You just mentioned stigma, but relating to that but perhaps a little different from that is guilt. So, taking the same approach, what is the guilt that survivors might experience and how might that be addressed?

Andrew:

Yeah, thanks, Bruce. Transparently, I think with any deaths, there can be questions of why or what could I have done? Or even statements that we tell ourselves if I had only. For suicide loss survivors, these questions can be all the more intense given the relationship they had with the individual and given the circumstances.

And to make things tougher, there may never be an answer to those questions or those thoughts, which makes the work of moving forward in the journey of grief quite difficult. And so, for some, it's helpful to work on finding a purpose after a loss, figuring out, hey, they can make a positive impact in the world around them. Sometimes that's work, supporting others who are grieving or supporting others who are even struggling with suicidal thoughts.

For others, they combat those unanswerable questions with positive memories and feelings and remembering and sharing the good things in their lives as a result of the relationship they have with the deceased. And for some, it takes a little more time and effort and support to move past these feelings of guilt. And they may even engage with a spiritual adviser or psychological support to work through these feelings.

Bruce:

Lisa, I have a couple of questions about these actual courses themselves. When someone is going through one of these courses, will they be made aware of support resources that the military community has to offer?

Lisa:

Absolutely. And our military community also includes nonprofit organizations that we partner with, and one such is the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. And they have an extensive program for those who suffer a loss through a suicide death. And in both of our courses, they're available. They're available to most any listener, and they help inform of how we can care for ourselves because it's important to take care of yourself and then you can take care of others. And so much of what is discussed is having compassion for yourself and for others and for the varied experience and responses that could occur immediately after and throughout the grieving journey through a suicide loss.

And it's important to note that you don't have to do this alone, that there are organizations out there. There's Military OneSource where you can call and they can arrange for non-medical counseling, if you're eligible. And there's also Veterans Affairs. They have bereavement centers that can also assist with a military death by suicide.

Bruce:

The course itself, in order to access it, do you need to sign in with a military email account or some ID or some sort of credentialing or how does that work?

Lisa:

For the course "After a Suicide," that's available for anybody. So, you do have to establish an account within the MilLife Learning. It's very simple. If you just go on the website and just follow the steps. However, for the one for service providers, you do have to have a common access card or you have to have a certification card, and then you'll be able to take that course, which is the "After a Suicide: Walking Through Providing Support."

Bruce:

Got it. But for the course "After a Suicide," for service members and family members, they could make this course available to an individual. A service member, for example, could make that course available to a close friend who's not in the military or perhaps their parents, for them to get a perspective of what they're being taught to make them a better friend or a better parent. Would that be an option?

Lisa:

Absolutely, and I highly recommend it. It's even a course that I share with others who are not affiliated with the military, as well, because I find that it's that helpful and very informative.

Bruce:

And this course is available pretty much on demand, right? I mean, when a person is ready, that course needs to be ready for them. This is basically a course that's ready to go when the individual is?

Lisa:

Absolutely, Bruce. And what's so neat about our course is that you can take them over and over again, or if you want to stop at a certain point and then come back to it, you can do that. You can do it in a little bit. You can do it in a big chunk and you can watch it over and over because sometimes we need a tune-up or just reminders as we're going through grief. Because grief is not just something you just get over. It's a life journey.

Bruce:

Absolutely. Dr. Moon, any final words on the topic?

Andrew:

Sure. Thank you. One thing that I would just highlight, and I think is at the core of both of these courses is that connection in almost every circumstance is a protective healing factor. And so much of what we feel and think about can cause us to want to isolate and avoid or can cause us to feel shame as we mentioned, thinking about suicide loss specifically. And where a good chunk of the focus is how you can remain connected to those that you find support with and how important that connection really is.

Bruce:

Yeah, the connection is definitely there. Getting people to reach out is quite the challenge. Lisa, any final words?

Lisa:

I recommend for anybody that has been exposed to a suicide, whether you know the person or you don't know the person, that you take our course "After a Suicide." It's 45 minutes. I think it's very informative. And just to remember that postvention suicide equals suicide prevention.

Bruce:

Thank you very much to the both of you for being with us today.

Andrew:

Thank you.

Lisa:

Thank you.

Bruce:

Lisa Valentine and Dr. Andrew Moon offering us two online courses providing support and guidance to those affected by suicide. Thank you very much for listening. I want to

remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department for a website. We're a call center, we're on social media, and now we're a podcast. We hope that you'll go ahead and subscribe. We obviously cover a wide range of topics that help military families thrive mid military life. Thanks very much for listening.

I'm Bruce Moody. Bye-bye.