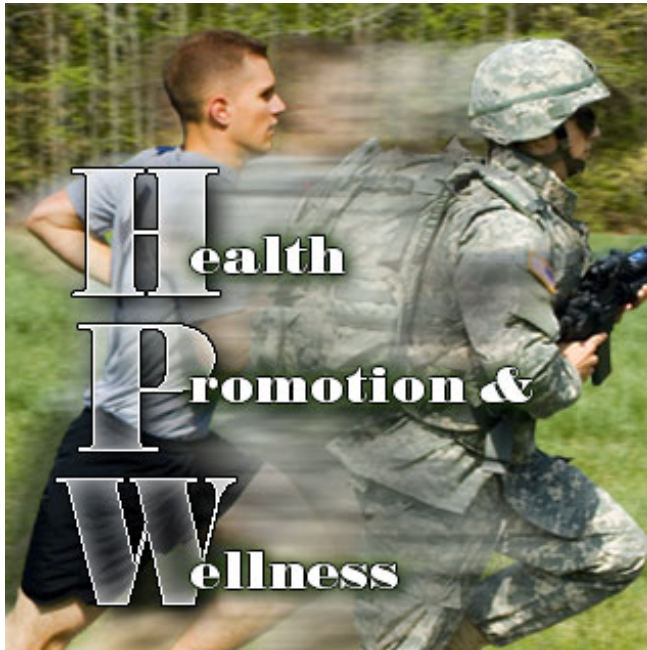


Active listening can save lives

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Oct. 2, 2008 -- Spc. Morgan has been deployed to Afghanistan for eight months. While on a recent R&R, he learned that his girlfriend had been cheating on him. When he tried to talk to her about their relationship, she informed him that she no longer wanted to be his girlfriend.

Morgan was devastated over the loss of his girlfriend. When he returned to Afghanistan, he told his battle buddy what had happened. He said that just thinking about his girlfriend had helped him to cope with his deployment, and added, "I can't see myself

living without her."

His battle buddy was preoccupied with a video game but glanced at Morgan and blurt out that he ought to just, "forget the b----."

Does this sound familiar? It should, because, while not based on a real-life Spc. Morgan, it is based on common experiences. Some individuals experience suicidal thoughts in response to life events. They frequently give warning signs or clues. In this example, Morgan's battle buddy was a good Soldier and friend. But, he was not a good listener. He didn't really "hear" what Morgan was saying. He missed the clue, a possible warning sign that Morgan was in emotional distress and might even be thinking of suicide. He didn't "get the message" and lost his opportunity to help prevent a possible loss of life.

The overall goal of the Army Suicide Prevention Program is to reduce Soldier suicides. It is founded on a belief that many suicides are preventable and that with proper awareness, caring and a little training, anyone can help a Soldier who is thinking of suicide. There are many reasons to be invested in preventing Soldier suicides. The loss of a Soldier to suicide is an individual and family tragedy; it is also a devastating event for the military unit. It affects unit cohesion and seriously disrupts the unit's

ability to sustain its mission.

Learning and practicing a simple technique called "active listening" can save lives. Below are the basic steps to active listening.

1. Look your battle buddy in the eyes; suspend other things that you are doing.
2. Listen not merely to the words, but the feeling content.
3. Be sincerely interested in what your battle buddy is talking about.
 4. Talk to your battle buddy alone in a private setting.
 5. Allow your battle buddy to talk freely.
 6. Restate what your battle buddy said.
7. Ask clarification questions once in a while.
8. Be aware of your own feelings and strong opinions.
9. When talking to your battle buddy, give him and yourself plenty of time.
10. Stay calm and objective.
11. Don't criticize or argue with your battle buddy's thoughts and feelings, but listen and allow time for him/her to find words.

Suicide prevention is everyone's responsibility. It is imperative that every leader and Soldier learn how to intervene on behalf of a Soldier or battle buddy who is thinking of suicide. Actively listening to a suicidal Soldier will provide relief from the pain. It is a sign of strength when Soldiers seek help for emotional problems that they may be encountering. Listen for cries of help and intervene to benefit the Soldier, leader and unit.

If you've read this far, you may be asking, "What do I do next?" No one can read another person's mind. Be prepared to ask directly if your buddy is thinking of killing himself/herself. Then escort your buddy to the chaplain or behavioral health services. The Army has easy-to-learn suicide prevention training programs. Ask your leadership or chaplain how to get involved.

Suicide prevention materials from the Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine are available on the Web at <http://chppm-www.apgea.army.mil/dhpw/Readiness/suicide.aspx?>

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