A awareness of suicide helps SAVE

Veterans Affairs official discusses a four-step prevention process

By TOM VOGT
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A dozen veterans kill themselves every day in the United States. Make veterans twice as likely as civilians of either sex to commit suicide.

For Rob Tell, those findings by Veterans Affairs researchers are a call to save lives. And he's doing it through "Operation SAVE."

Tell is coordinator of the suicide-prevention program at the Portland Veterans Affairs Medical Center. He spoke Monday at Clark College as part of the school's "Mental Health Monday" series.

"We don't turn people into counselors," Tell said at Monday's forum in the Penguin Student Lounge. "But the program does provide background on veteran-specific suicide risks, and offers tips on talking with a veteran who might be suicidal."

Veterans can be stressed by frequent deployments in hostile environments, said Tell, who also serves Vancouver's VA campus. Even vets who don't face high-stress deployments can hit a crisis when their military careers end.

"People in the military have a clear mission," Tell said. When they leave the service, "There can be a big void instead of a sense of purpose."

"Operation SAVE" gets its name from the initial letters in a four-step process designed to help veterans in crisis: Signs of suicidal thinking; Ask questions: Validate the person's experience; Encourage treatment and expedite getting help.

- Signs include: Threatening to kill or hurt yourself, looking for ways to kill yourself (stockpiling pills, getting a firearm), expressing a hope or a desire for revenge, acting recklessly, withdrawing, difficulty sleeping, or sleeping all the time.

- Asking involves phrasing the question simply and directly: "Have you thought about killing yourself?" Ask at an appropriate time, based on what the person has told you about his or her feelings and experiences; don't argue, and listen more than you speak.

- Validate the veteran's experience by making it clear you follow what he or she is saying; acknowledge that the situation deserves attention.

- Encourage treatment; explain that professionals are available to help, and that treatment works; point out that a mental health issue is no different from any other medical problem.

Suicide prevention efforts can work, Tell said. When the U.S. Air Force was faced with a rash of suicides, it instituted mandatory monthly discussions about suicide and mental health. "The suicide rate..."
Veterans:

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dropped 30 percent," Tell said.

People who have been contemplating suicide can change their minds, he said, citing the experience of a man who sur-

vived a jump from San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge. "The second he left the
bridge, he told himself, 'Crap.'"

Bridge security personnel have stopped many other people

suspected of being potential jumpers, Tell said.

After 35 years, 90 percent of the people they stopped were

still alive or had died of natu-

ral causes.

Most people who are consid-

ering suicide say something

that could be an indicator,"Tell

said.

It can include expressions

of "Thank you" or "I was nice

knowing you" in a setting that
doesn't make any sense, or

leaves you wondering, "What

was that about?"

The list of suicide signs can

fit a lot of nonsuicidal

people — "Half the people in

this country can't sleep?" — so

trust your gut if it feels funny.

Tell said.

The recent mass shooting

at Fort Hood in Texas didn't

exactly match Tell's discus-

don. But the U.S. Army major

arrested in the deaths of 13

people apparently didn't ex-

pect to survive his attack, and

he expressed some of the sui-

cide warning signs before his

rampage, Tell said.