

The Veteran's Club

A charitable peer-to-peer program to lower suicides in veterans living in the Coeur d'Alene area, leveraging the power of social connectedness and purpose

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Summary

This paper provides the rationale for the ‘Veteran’s Club’, a charitable program dedicated to reducing veteran suicide. It attempts to synthesize unique aspects of military culture with a medical understanding of how our brain handles the stress of social isolation, and the resultant anxiety disorders and thoughts of suicide. It also reviews loneliness, which is alarmingly common in the U.S. Loneliness not only afflicts some veterans, but is an emerging public health concern, affecting about one in three American adults (Anderson and Thayer 2018; Straus et al. 2021).

The current suicide rate of American veterans is double that of American adults. Estimates range from about 17 to 22 deaths per day nationally. Suicide is the visible “tip of the iceberg”, above a Pandora’s Box of afflictions generally kept well hidden from the public’s eye.

The Veteran’s Club will become a 501(c)(3) charity. Its inventor is Ed Bejarana, a U.S. Army veteran and Army musician (aspects relevant herein). The Veteran’s Club has already gained a coalition of supporters. Its project management framework has been used to produce pancake breakfasts attended by hundreds of area veterans. Key strategic alliances with other charities are being developed, e.g. with the Rotary Club of Coeur d’Alene and the Coeur d’Alene Symphony Orchestra.

This program is designed to guide and encourage veterans through a 3-step “think, do, teach” wellness program. Think” is the first step, and involves light exercises that help build a mentally resilient mindset. “Do” involves activities like learning to play a guitar or reading to a child. The final level, “Teach”, is what will make the program self-sustainable.

An innovative element of this program are “Veteran Buddies”, two person veteran-to-veteran units (V2Vs). Veteran buddies are modeled after the military’s “battle buddy” system. *No exact correlate exists in the civilian world to battle buddies; the closest there is probably bromance.* Whereas bromance require deep mutual friendships, battle buddy does not. Veteran buddies do not have to be close friends for V2Vs to be effective. A V2V does requires an unswerving commitment between veterans who agree to try to protect and support each other through tough times. Many V2V units will gradually develop into strong friendships, but some may not, and that is OK.

Battle buddy programs are funded by all branches of the U.S. military **because they make better soldiers.**

Nature provides many examples of non-friend mutualism, e.g. certain acacia trees and certain ant species. The ants live inside the branches, drink nectar exuded from leaf glands, and defend the trees from insects that chew leaves and wood. Tree-ant interactions utilize an extremely simple set of rules. Not being friends is a benefit because their interactions are not exposed to the volatility and complexity that characterizes human friendships. The ants and trees simply help each other.

Benefits of V2Vs

1. Speed. Veteran support programs that pin their success on veterans forming deep friendships are necessarily slowed down by the time it takes to build real friendships. In contrast, a V2V can be formed in as little as a day. It will be effective so long as the veterans who made the pact honor it.
2. Address Solomon's Paradox. King Solomon was famous for offering wise advice to others, but his own life was often a bit of a mess. Some regard this as a universal truth, i.e. that it is easier to wisely guide another person than to do the same for oneself.
3. Reason for Living. Suicide does not occur until there is an utter loss of the will to live. Accepting responsibility for helping another person "survive" is a higher purpose and this can become a Reason for Living. It is a form of altruism involving kindness to others. It can also be the impetus to elevate one's own behaviors, akin to the pressure parents feel to role-model for their children.
4. Early Warning System. A buddy can be the first person to identify – and act on -- a serious worsening in a buddy's mental state (Albott et al. 2020). Battle buddies are obligated to help guide fellow buddies who may be becoming suicidal to seek out appropriate medical professionals and support systems.
5. Friendship. There is some evidence that shared stress builds deeper friendships. Stress shared by veterans may even stimulate faster social bonding (Muroy et al. 2016). Friendship may increase the benefits generated by V2Vs.

Social connectedness is integral to the success of support groups.

Studies of veterans often find that the greatest challenge they face in returning to civilian society is the social isolation caused by the loss of military brotherhood. Social isolation damages the brain's resilience to bounce back from stress. Social isolation can lead to loneliness. Extreme loneliness and other challenges created by social isolation can exacerbate thoughts of suicide.

Social connectedness is integral to the success of diverse peer-to-peer support groups. Still, being an intangible, some will remain skeptical of the efficacy of meaningful social connection as a therapeutic approach to reduce veteran suicide. To help address these skeptic's concerns, it may help to delve deeper into the medical (e.g genetics and biochemistry, particularly of the brain) underpinnings of social isolation on anxiety disorders to provide a hard, scientific basis of the benefits of social connectedness.

Although certainly complex, the ways veterans perceive, qualify/quantify, respond to, and then try to bounce back from periods of stress are gradually being teased apart by medical studies. For example, a 2021 study of Iraq/Afghanistan war veterans provided evidence suggesting an epigenetic control (i.e. genes turned on or off) regulating oxytocin signaling in the brain. Oxytocin, a hormone with many impacts on the body, is a primary modulator of our resilience (i.e. ability to "bounce back") to stress. Oxytocin also influences our ability to "recognize" certain people/animals we "trust" or "love".

Furthermore:

- The National Health and Resilience in Veteran's Study:
 - Began in Year 2011 with 83 publications resulting.
 - A 2021 study by Fogel et al. involved 4,641 Veterans split into two groups:
 - "... prevention and treatment efforts designed to promote protective psychosocial characteristics (i.e., resilience, gratitude, purpose in life) **and social connectedness (i.e., secure attachment, community integration, social engagement)** help mitigate risk for mental disorders, and promote psychological resilience and post-traumatic growth <in U.S. veterans>."
- A gene called *Tob* influences resilience/vulnerability to stress (a stress coping response), as well as influencing learning and memory, in mice (Youssef et al. 2022) and thus possibly in humans. Strains of mice that lacked the *Tob* gene displayed fear and depression-like behavior.

The Veteran's Club is necessarily lean and cost-efficient, to make it as easy as possible for civic organizations like Rotary to support. Rotarians who seek a larger role in the Veteran's Club can offer their talents in such areas as governance, medical and psychiatric support, security, cybersecurity, finance, communication, website and marketing, grants, strategic alliances and data.

What will elevate the Veteran's Club to the national stage is **efficacy and self-sustainability.**

Introducing Veteran Suicide

In Year 2020, the U.S. Veteran' Administration concluded that the annual suicide rate of U.S. Veterans was double that of U.S. adults (0.037% vs 0.019%). In this year (2023), about six thousand veterans nationwide are forecast to die by their own hand. This equates to about 17 suicides every day (U.S. Veteran Affairs 2022). Some studies forecast higher numbers of daily suicides.

In 2022, even after the first two years of decline since 2006 in the adjusted suicide rate of veterans, the U.S. Veteran's Administration's Secretary, Denise McDonough, reported that **the VA's top clinical priority was to reduce veteran suicide.**

And suicide is just the tip of the iceberg. Beneath it are 'failed suicides', suicidal thoughts, severe depression, PTSD, diabetes, poverty, poor nutrition, poor sleep, diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease, alcohol and drug addictions, domestic violence and many other social, physical and mental ailments. These are exacerbated by war wounds such as traumatic brain injury from battlefield explosions.¹ For every veteran suicide, hundreds may struggle (and often outside of the public's eye). Every country with returning soldiers faces challenges of providing and affording veteran care. *In the U.S. about \$9 billion is spent annually on federal programs to prevent veteran suicides.*

Suicides are a blatant metric of an inadequate support system for veterans; the bitter end to a negative spiral overlaying a complex and painful psychosocial/economic syndrome. That complexity is, itself, a challenge. Many capable charitable groups with their 'heart in the right place' nevertheless have not measurably reduced suicide rates of their area veterans below that already achieved by existing support services.

The obligation of prudence requires that the Reader approach any prospective 'solution', including ours herein, with a healthy dollop of skepticism. The semi-academic nature of this paper was required to help the Authors critically evaluate the options available to us. No matter how well defended certain ideas are herein, it will be essential to obtain valid data to independently assess this program's efficacy and ROI over the next few years. We advocate trying out new ideas to see what works best.

¹ Concussion is a mild form of TBI, but repeated concussion has been associated with neurodegeneration.

Objective

Understandably, Americans find the suicide rates of Veterans unacceptably high. These soldiers served their country and earned the right to be satisfied and productive citizens. Veterans deserve to enjoy a good quality of life. If they have to rely on drug and alcohol dependencies and opiates to just survive the pain of each day, then we believe there must be a better way.

Proud veterans eschew hand-outs - but can accept a hand-up – if offered cordially and respectfully. This program is based on simple values of efficacy, respect and kindness. The power of kindness is easily overlooked, but medical science supports its efficacy at combating the anxiety associated with social isolation. A study just published, for example, found acts of kindness to be more effective than either social activities or thought records, i.e., cognitive reappraisal at improving depression/anxiety symptoms and life satisfaction.²

There is a danger in framing veteran challenges as a ‘struggle’ and ‘burden’ **when, really, this should be framed as an opportunity to build wellness.** These people are our friends and neighbors. And most veterans are psychologically resilient, productive citizens and family leaders.

Program efficacy needs to be defined and measured (and unbiased data collected/managed) **in collaboration with 3rd-party research partners.** Data to include measures of suicide rate of participants (vs. controls), as well as suicidal tendencies, using psychologically valid instruments. Such studies will require reasonable timeframes, e.g. 36 months.

Operational success in the immediate term requires the program be clearly and concisely structured, lean and cost-effective, and operationally feasible, given the normal constraints of volunteer engagement, time, and human/financial capital.

Our objective is to devise a program, to add to all those already in place, that can rapidly and significantly improve veteran wellness and quality of life, and, consequently, reduce veteran suicide rates.

² E.g. David R. Cregg & Jennifer S. Cheavens (2022) Healing through helping: an experimental investigation of kindness, social activities, and reappraisal as well-being interventions, The Journal of Positive Psychology, DOI: 10.1080/17439760.2022.2154695. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17439760.2022.2154695?journalCode=rpos20>

Finding Strategic Leverage

Rotarians want to help Veterans, *but how?* Has some aspect been misjudged or overlooked, one sufficiently powerful that it could spark lasting improvements in the lives of veterans? And can that be translated into a feasible and effective operation?

Strategy requires leverage. Leverage focuses effort in a manner that effectively multiplies a limited force against a daunting challenge. David had a strategy for killing Goliath. All his force was focused into a small stone hurled at high velocity with practiced accuracy directly into Goliath's skull from a short distance away. Goliath actually had little chance of surviving.

Basically David shot Goliath with the ancient equivalent of a bullet. He was also agile enough that, had he missed, he could have taken another shot.

Unfortunately, teasing apart bad strategy from good strategy is hard, largely owing to the hindsight bias. Effective strategy often sounds obvious after-the-fact, while the same approach may have originally sounded too weak or subtle or even absurd.³ The strategy that proved effective against the USSR prior to its collapse was psychological economics; by enticing the USSR into a spiral of military overspending, that finally bankrupted the USSR's economy.⁴ The world's most valuable companies can control through oligopolies the platforms and data structures that underpin essential human activities like commerce and media/entertainment, but to gain their early sales momentum they often emphasized such intangibles as good design, convenience and quality customer service -- none of which typically show up as assets on balance sheets.

So how might we find a real point of leverage? Surely so many experts have reviewed this challenge that we must fail. Where could we start? What about constraints?

Rather paradoxically, some business research studies have found that imposing severe constraints tends to improve strategy.⁵ America's deserved reputation for business innovation is, unquestionably, due to the stiff constraints imposed by open competition with tough business competitors, for example.

We therefore started our analysis by imposing a brutal assumption: civic organizations have little time or money to devote to our new program. If civic organizations already carry a heavy

³ Albert Einstein said: "An idea is not worth considering if at first it does not appear absurd".

⁴ Book: Good Strategy versus Bad Strategy, by Richard Rumelt.

⁵ E.g. "Why Constraints are Good for Innovation", Harvard Business Review, November 22, 2019. <https://hbr.org/2019/11/why-constraints-are-good-for-innovation>

load of civic service, then a new veteran support program that required heavy engagement from Rotarians would likely fail, or at least prove unsustainable.

Applying this harsh constraint became our impetus for fresh thinking. It forced us to turn our attention away from Rotarians and Rotary Intl. towards veterans themselves. Instead of asking “How should Rotarians help Veterans?”, we began to ask: “Could veterans effectively help themselves under light guidance from groups like Rotary?”. It was this line of thinking that helped us see something easily overlooked: battle buddies.

The battle buddy system is familiar to soldiers. It has been used throughout centuries, across diverse cultures and fighting styles, to help win wars. It helps soldiers win battles and survive.

We also want to help former soldiers survive.

Buddy Programs in the U.S. Military

The U.S. military is a staunch supporter of buddy programs. Programs that encourage new recruits to enter as “buddies” exist in all five branches of the U.S. military.⁶ Legislators, having independently critiqued buddy recruit programs, also support military buddy programs.

The US Army assigns a “Battle Buddy” to every soldier, beginning in Basic Training and continuing throughout one’s military career, ensuring that no one is left behind, particularly in combat. Critically, each Battle Buddy is expected to assist their partner in and out of combat (Albott et al. 2020).

Suicide prevention is an objective of the battle buddy system. Both military and legislative officials found assignment of battle buddies to be an effective method of decreasing military suicide rates: **“Battle buddies have been shown to reduce suicide rates.”**

-- Albott et al. 2020

Soldiers like the buddy program. The U.S. Army Research Institute conducted a study of over 900 soldiers to evaluate its buddy team assignment program (Ramsberger, Legree and Mills 2003). Over 80% of soldiers reported at least liking their battle buddy, with half saying they liked him very much. Over half (68%) agreed or agreed strongly that the buddy program was a

⁶ Military Buddy Program (OMK). <https://www.operationmilitarykids.org/military-buddy-program/>. Downloaded February 2, 2023.

good Army practice. Only 10% disagreed. Battle buddies benefitted: 85% of respondents said they were at least somewhat responsible for their battle buddy's success. The U.S. Marines takes it one step further: active marine soldiers on stressful assignments are give extra pay when they meet certain criteria of buddies.⁷

Civilians tend to assume that friendship necessarily underpins “battle buddy” relationships; after all, that is how Hollywood always portrays them. In the movie Forrest Gump, Forrest and Bubba enjoy an easy friendship. They go through hell together. They have seen each other at their best – and worst. They understand each other. And, in combat, they each would take risks to protect each other (in the modern military, they would also have been trained, if not blood matched, to be able to give each other blood transfusions). Unquestionably, battle buddies can develop deep platonic friendships. *But is being a battle buddy about friendship?*

If battle buddies were just about “being friends”, they would not be supported with taxpayer dollars.

Being a battle buddy is a kind of psychological contract, a survival pact. Battle buddies agree to blindly follow a code of honor. It does not first require reviewing the depth of one's friendship before taking action! In the lexicon of the U.S. military, it is simply: “I have your back and you have mine”.

The concept of battle buddies has even been used effectively against U.S. soldiers. Nazi war soldiers recruited from specific small German townships were often kept together in Army units. It is thought that this improved their soldiering ability. Some historians believe such soldiers were more supportive of each other during battle than they were towards supporting the Nazi cause (D. Porter, 2023, pers. comm.).

WWI pilots were the first to say, "I got your six". This meant they were intensely scrutinizing the rearward airspace so that enemy pilots could not come up behind their plane and shoot it down.

"I got ‘cho six" or "I got ‘cho back” does not first require doublechecking that you are still bosom pals.

⁷ Ibid.

Social Isolation and Loneliness in Civilian Life

The pressures and unique environments of military life clearly can create strong bonds amongst soldiers. While this is not “family” in the strict sense (sociologists define families as economic units, which battle buddies are not), male soldiers often refer to battle buddies as a “bros” or a “brotherhood”. Female soldiers use a comparable lexicon to describe their bonds of sisterhood.

Years of soldiering creates strong and intuitive bonds between soldiers.

Unfortunately, when soldiers do leave the military, they quickly begin losing their circle of battle buddies and other military peers. With each year, that circle tends to shrink further. At some point, no circle may be left for some older veterans. This exacerbates social isolation of veterans, who already may feel isolated somewhat from being around civilians who lack military experience. Humans are social and need meaningful social connections.

Leaving military buddies is hard, even on soldiers venturing back to the “attractions” of civilian life.

Social isolation creates several types of problems, perhaps the most serious of which is the unpleasant mental state we call severe loneliness. The anxiety and anger associated with loneliness disrupts the brain’s normal equilibrium. This can increase distrust of others, disrupt sleep, eating and exercise habits, and encourage social withdrawal. *In some countries, social withdrawal has risen sharply.* In Japan, for example, an extreme form of social withdrawal has begun afflicting many young adults in Japan (“hikikomori”; Teo and Gaw 2010).

Studies increasingly support the link between loneliness and adverse health outcomes (Surkalim et al. 2020). Loneliness is associated with unfavourable cardiovascular health indicators like increased activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, high blood pressure, increased cholesterol levels, and coronary heart disease. Loneliness is associated with sleep disturbance, increased risk of mild cognitive impairment, dementia and obesity. Loneliness can be detrimental to behavioral, mental, and social health throughout the remainder of one’s life, and influence such outcomes as substance misuse, anxiety, depression, poor subjective wellbeing, and suicidal ideation. People with chronic loneliness have a significantly higher risk of mortality.

National rates of loneliness are high in the U.S. compared to many other countries:

- Globally only about 10% of people report that they have experienced loneliness at least once in their life (Surkalim et al. 2022).

- Most studies of loneliness, both before and during the covid pandemic, observed loneliness rates between 30% and 50% in U.S. adults (and higher again in specific groups like mothers with young children).
- Some studies report quite high rates of loneliness amongst U.S. adults. National surveys by Cigna, an insurance company, reported levels of loneliness of 54% in 2018 and 61% in 2019.⁸

Military life is culturally and emotionally foreign to most civilians. A lack of nuanced understanding of soldiers by civilians *is certainly not intentional*, but neither is it uncommon. Psychiatrists know that family members and civilian friends often cannot internalize what veterans go through when they leave the military or how isolated they may quickly become having left it. And some civilians are antagonistic to the military and its aims.

A veteran's isolation can stand in the way of creating an intuitive understanding with loved ones. This is an additional challenge. Veterans may also be uniquely vulnerable to adverse mental health effects of the covid pandemic, such as increased loneliness (Na et al. 2022).

There is no universal way that struggling veterans think about their social isolation.

A charitable veteran support organization, “Make the Connection”, posts quotes from Veterans about their experiences with social isolation. These quotes offer insight into the different ways veterans express their struggles with social isolation:⁹

- “You watch any animal that’s hurt. What does it do? *It withdraws.* Animals have a trust in existence that *they either get better or they die*, you know? So, it’s real normal to withdraw.”
- “My life just was slowly shrinking,” explained a Marine Corps veteran who served in Vietnam. “If I went golfing, I went alone.”
- “You kind of go into this bubble. It usually consists of home, work and a select few friends, and you don’t want to interact with anything outside of that bubble.”
- A female Vietnam War veteran said: “... you’re going to eventually have to talk to someone and connect with someone.”

⁸ Cigna national survey (2018). <https://www.cigna.com/static/www-cigna-com/docs/about-us/newsroom/studies-and-reports/combating-loneliness/cigna-2020-loneliness-factsheet.pdf>

⁹ [https://www.maketheconnection.net/read-stories/Veteran’s-discuss-isolation/#:~:text=Left%20unchecked%2C%20social%20isolation%20can,understanding%20with%20their%20loved%20ones,downloaded 23-JAN-23.](https://www.maketheconnection.net/read-stories/Veteran’s-discuss-isolation/#:~:text=Left%20unchecked%2C%20social%20isolation%20can,understanding%20with%20their%20loved%20ones,downloaded%2023-JAN-23.)

Battle Buddies, not Bromances

The closest relationship to battle buddies that exists in the civilian world seems to be a bromance. Like most battle buddies, bromances are platonic male relationships. Bromances are based on deep mutual connections between friends, and this gets reflected in the words used, e.g. “mates” or “pals”. Some bromances even have an economic underpinning, e.g. co-founders (thus meeting the broad socioeconomic definition of family). The old joke is that bromances are “just brothers from a different mother.”

Most folks have heard of a few famous bromances. Tedia clearly enjoys promoting light-hearted speculation over the close friendships amongst famous heterosexual men. This includes star athletes (Usain Bolt and Andre de Grasse), film actors (George Clooney and Brad Pitt) and politicians (President Obama and Vice President Biden). Several movies have portrayed fictional bromances, e.g. Andy and Red in the movie *Shawshank Redemption*.

The question is not: “Are some military buddies bromances?” but “Must all military buddies be bromances?” *In our opinion, the answer is obviously no.* Friendship is not a requirement for battle buddies. You do not have to be in the cockpit with a close friend for him or her to follow, or benefit from, the simple code of honor battle buddies adhere to. Being a battle buddy is about soldiering.

Sometimes the way Mother Nature works can prove instructive; consider certain tropical ants and trees for example. Ants that protect acacia trees from insect herbivory do not do it because they are “friends”. The tree is not the ant’s “friend”. Nature does not require friendship; maybe it even avoids it. *The relationship between ants and acacia trees works consistently because they are not friends.* Their interactions are more reliable than friendship. In the words of the sportswear company Nike: these ants and trees “Just Do It”. The tree houses and feeds the ants, the ants protect the tree – period.

Nature is harshly effective and simple. It typically does not rely on friendship as the basis of mutualism between organisms.

Brain Science of Social Isolation

Brain science studies have begun dissecting the physiological/genetic root causes of how social isolation increases suicidal tendencies of veterans. In the context of this paper this is relevant because it helps prove that social connectedness is not some hippy 50’s flower-power fad. Meaningful social connection is a valid, effective and proven therapy to counter mental disorders, addiction, poor mental resilience and suicidal tendencies, backed by independent medical/psychological studies. Connectedness has a rich and varied basis in the success of

many support groups, whether it is CEOs of startups (e.g. Young Entrepreneur's Organization, YEO) or Alcoholics Anonymous.¹⁰

A brain hormone, oxytocin, is of particular interest. A recent study, Warrener et al. 2021, entitled "The role of oxytocin signaling in depression and suicidality in returning war veterans" tested the hypothesis that veterans with more frequent contact with comrades have fewer symptoms of depression and suicidality. The study involved 86 male Veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan wars who underwent psychological tests (e.g. Beck Depression score) and provided specimens for medical/genetic analysis.

This study's principle finding (with a strong statistical relationship) **was "poor social connectedness was associated statistically with symptoms of depression and suicidality".**

Other results were weaker, but appear possible:

- Sleep quality and anxiety disorders *were not* associated with social connectedness *but were* associated with mental health symptoms.
- Veteran mental health was more impacted by lack of social connectedness than by separation from close comrades *per se*.
- Level of oxytocin, a brain hormone associated with social bonding, recognition and trust, *was not* associated with mental health symptoms.
- Epigenetic gene regulation of oxytocin was associated with depression and suicidal tendency. This exciting finding will be carefully retested in the near future.

These last points above are noteworthy because they offer insight into the biochemistry/genetics of stress veterans encounter. Social isolation may increase suicidal thoughts *by reducing our brain's sensitivity to oxytocin*. This would tend to make affected persons *more distrustful of others*. If true, this helps explain the frequent observation from animal and human studies that *oxytocin mediates the brain's resilience to stress*.

"Our findings suggest that efforts aimed at alleviating the burden of depression and suicidality in returning war veterans should focus on re-integrating veterans into society and establishing a feeling of social connectedness, as well as on treating anxiety disorders and sleep problems." – Warrener et al. 2021

Veterans in this study reported that the biggest challenge they faced in returning to civilian life was *the loss of brotherhood* they had enjoyed in the military (Fig. 1).

¹⁰ Indeed, AA's disciplined approach is one we find highly instructive. Discipline should be exercised in the Veteran's Club; there should be consequences if you cannot adhere to the rules of acceptable behavior.

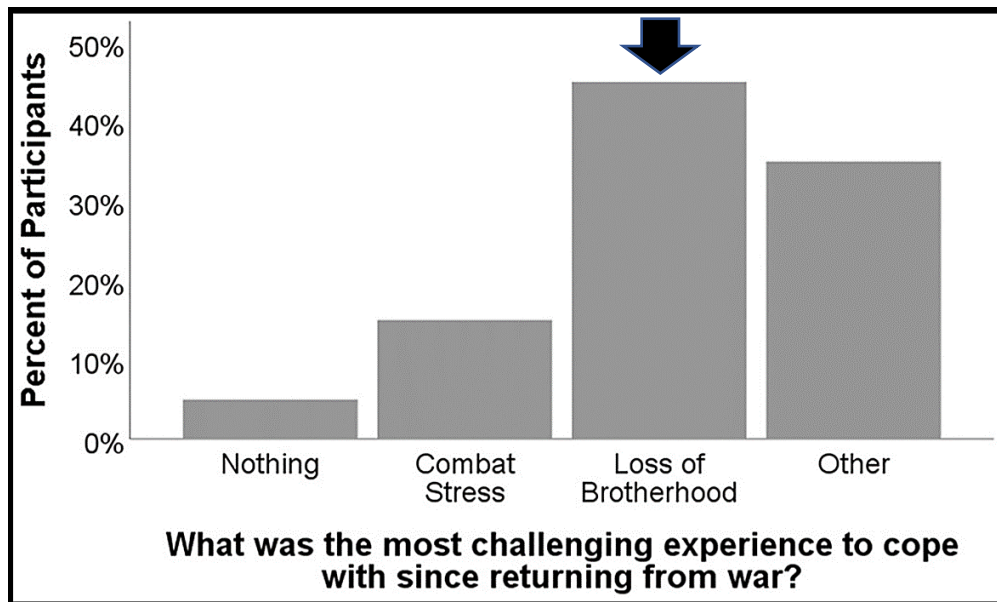


Fig. 1. Challenges soldiers face returning to civilian life (Warrener et al. 2021).

Health Issues associated with Military Service

Many health issues are statistically associated with military service and deployment. Some of these, like traumatic brain injury, are permanent disabilities. While it is unlikely that the services of the Veteran’s Club can “cure” soldiers with such brain injuries, there is medical evidence that social connectedness can help soldiers with minor physical injuries.

Common medical issues associated with military service:

- Traumatic brain injury (TBI)
 - **Even mild TBI is associated with a 2-fold higher risk of suicide.**
 - Between 9% and 28% of service members deployed to the Afghanistan war experienced a TBI.
 - TBIs are damage to the brain which later results in lesions and scarring. This damage is often where soft gray matter lays adjacent to tougher white matter of the brain.
 - **More than 450,000 U.S. service members were diagnosed with a TBI from 2000 to 2021** (Reger et al. 2021).
 - Severe TBIs are associated with:

- Loss of consciousness
 - Post-traumatic amnesia for more than 24 hours
 - Alteration of consciousness or mental state for more than 24 hours
- **TBIs are considered permanent; no medical cures yet exist.** After internal bleeding is stopped, rehabilitation may still be recommended, however.
- Moderate to severe TBIs can cause more significant difficulties with changes to their thinking and behavior. **People with severe TBIs can have lifelong mental changes.**¹¹
- 80% of TBIs happen to males.
- Individuals who experience emotional changes and stress after their head injury often have more difficulty recovering. Sometimes emotional symptoms can even appear as physical symptoms. Fortunately, counseling and medications are effective in treating these types of symptoms.

“People with strong support from family and friends can have easier recoveries from mild to moderate TBIs.”
– Cleveland Clinic, Feb. 2, 2023

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Shell shock
 - Headaches
 - Dizziness
 - Fuzzy thinking
 - Sleep disorders
 - Difficulty concentrating
 - Memory problems
 - Depression

¹¹ Cleveland Clinic: <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/8874-traumatic-brain-injury>. Downloaded February 2, 2023.

- Anxiety
- Chronic pain
- Alzheimer's disease (a type of dementia)
- Acquired central auditory processing disorder (ACAPD)
- Sleep disturbance, e.g. sleep fragmentation and insomnia

Suicidality is Complex

It is a mistake to view suicide as “something simple with a simple fix”. It is not. The authors expressly wish to emphasize that the structure, activities and offering of the Veteran’s Club are not, and never will become, a magic fix.

A coordinated approach, supported by a range of organizational and medical experts, is required.

As a reminder of how complex suicidality is, it helps to be reminded that war actually suppresses suicidality. Over the last century, suicide rates have declined during times of war (Reger et al. 2022). Yet, during the Afghanistan War the US Army suicide rate almost doubled from 2005 to 2011, apparently owing to traumatic brain injury (Reger et al. 2022) usually associated with explosions. And in a study of mostly suicidal older adults, worrying about how badly one’s family would be hurt by your own suicide appeared to *increase* suicidal ideation (Britton et al. 2008).

Bottomline – it is essential that the Veterans Club always applies the principal that it is a *learning organization*, data lead, and able/willing to alter its course as needed to further improve efficacy and cost-effectiveness. Hubris has no place in the Veterans Club.

Reasons for Living (vs Reasons for Dying)

The “Internal Suicide Debate” hypothesis assumes that, in a suicidal crisis, individuals are involved in an internal struggle over whether to live or die. Reasons for Living (RFL) compete with Reasons for Dying (RFD).

There are thousands of severely depressed adults in the U.S. but most are not suicidal. Why not? Part of the answer is that many depressed people still have a strong “Reason For Living”. Reasons For Living are thought to reflect a sense of purpose and meaning, and these help people survive periods of difficulty.

Reasons For Living are defined as beliefs or expectancies that reduce risk for suicide. These include survival and coping beliefs, child-related concerns, fear of social disapproval, moral objections, fear of suicide, and personal responsibility for others.

Reasons for Living compete with Reasons for Dying. We need to find ways to tip that seesaw towards living.

Pioneering work by Britton et al. (2008) concluded that suicidal thoughts were inversely related with having Reasons for Living. This study involved 125 adults of age 50+ with mood disorders, 72 of which were suicidal (as assessed on a Scale of Suicide Ideation). All were

assessed for hopelessness (Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression and Beck Hopelessness Scale) and Reasons For Living.

Unfortunately, not all studies find that Reasons For Living are sufficient to reduce suicidality.

A Swiss study of 60 suicidal patients presenting to the emergency room found that suicidal tendency was more related to Reasons to Die than Reasons to Live (Brüderl et al. 2018). The Mayo Clinic states: “Most often, suicidal thoughts are the result of feeling like you can't cope when you're faced with what seems to be an overwhelming life situation.”¹²

In the lead up to a suicidal event, there are many entry points in which aspects like having Reasons to Live may nudge the final outcome away from suicidality. Admittedly this is challenging to prove, in part because suicidal urges are often brief. In soldiers, the “urge to commit suicide usually only lasts for a brief time from a few minutes to a month.”¹³ Still, if those brief moments could be influenced by a veteran buddy, significant reductions in veteran suicide should eventuate.

Conclusions

At first glance, the Veterans’s Club may seem trivial; people gathering for a pancake breakfast.

This sounds like volunteer fire department all across America who fundraise by throwing pancake breakfasts. Veteran’s Club breakfasts will attract many of the same people who come together to eat, drink, relax, escape the daily grind, laugh and commiserate, and share stories. Folks who come to renew old friendships and maybe start building new ones.

But behind this homespun façade, the Veteran’s Club is designed in a specific manner to achieve specific aims, using specific strategies, assessed with specific success criteria, and studied critically by independent research organizations. The Veteran’s Club was designed expressly to be uniquely effective in lowering rates of veteran suicide.

Recreating “veteran buddies” as V2V units,
modeled after “battle buddies”, **should be
perceived by most Veteran’s as natural** having
been exposed for years to it in the military.

¹² <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/suicide/symptoms-causes/syc-20378048>. Downloaded February 2, 2023.

¹³ For Benning: A battle buddy’s guide to suicide prevention. <https://www.benning.army.mil/garrison/dhr/asap/content/pdf/A%20BATTLE%20BUDDYS%20Guide%20to%20Suicide%20Prevention%20December%202008.pdf>. Downloaded February 2, 2023.

The Veteran’s Club leverages a subtle but fresh innovation, “veteran buddies” that involve V2V units. These veteran-to-veteran units were modeled off a relationship common in all branches of the U.S. military, but which are absent in civilian life, the “battle buddy”.

V2V units seem to offer a range of benefits. Chief among these is our contention that V2Vs can be effective even in the absence of friendship. As such they could deliver benefits to veterans faster than that from intimate social connections predicated on close friendships.

The code of behavior that govern V2Vs is reminiscent of an unthinking approach Nature takes to interspecific mutualism. Ants can protect trees and trees can house and feed ants even though they are not friends. *This is purely pragmatic; it is commonsense.* Nature may even eschew friendship, which is volatile, complex, slow to form, and can break. One reason battle buddies works is its consistency. Sociologists refer to such relationships as “instrumental” because a buddy always shows up when there is trouble.

There is ample evidence that the social isolation that plagues some soldiers after they leave military service can be serious, long-lived, and exacerbate suicidality. People who feel under constant serious personal, financial and emotional threat may lose their normal resilience to stress. They need a respite and a way to cope.

The “Club” part of the Veteran’s Club is light-hearted. It is intended to give a respite from stress and to help replace hopelessness with hope, in a supportive environment championed visibly by a large swath of influential community leaders.

The Veteran Club’s V2Vs obligate veteran buddies to look out for each other. As veterans do more for others, whether “Do” activities like reading a child a book, or “Teach” activities, these can become additional Reasons for Living. Reasons for Living counter suicidal tendencies right up to the point when Reasons for Dying become overwhelmingly intense and urgent.

The Veteran’s Club will probably not save every suicidal veteran. It cannot cure severe and permanent traumatic brain injuries. Nor will it be so transformative that it can quickly replace extreme hopelessness with bountiful hopefulness or replace financial struggles with financial freedom.

Even if the Veteran’s Club saves just one person, maybe that is enough.

And for every one suicide permanently averted, there could be a hundred other veterans whose quality of life really is improved. This is mission of the Veteran’s Club: to rebuild lives and hope through meaningful connection and life purpose.

The Veteran’s Club will not “go it alone”. It will seek out best practices, from any source, and openly interact with quality organizations offering quality services. The U.S. Army’s Suicide Prevention Care Continuum (SP2), part of its Suicide Prevention Program (SP2), has, for example, developed a methodology called ACE that is proven effective for suicide prevention training.¹⁴ The Army ACE Suicide Intervention (ACE-SI) Program is a three-hour training that provides soldiers with the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to intervene with those at risk for suicide. We would just replace the phrase “battle buddy” with our phrase, veteran buddy or V2V:

1. **“Ask** your battle buddy or Family member if he or she is thinking about harming themselves. Asking won’t increase the likelihood that they will commit suicide. You won’t place the idea in their head.”
2. **“Care** for your battle buddy or Family member by listening and reassuring them that immediate help is available. Calmly talk to them and use words like “let me make sure I understand you, do you mean...” And remove any means that they might use to harm themselves.”
3. **“Escort** your battle buddy or Family member to get help. This can be an emergency room, a primary care provider, or a behavioral health professional. If they refuse to go with you, do not leave them alone. Call 911 if necessary.”

The Veteran’s Club will draw up rules of behavior and strongly encourage participants to follow them. These rules will probably emulate those already used and proven effective in the military, such as the following (Wilbanks 2008):

U.S. Army Fort Benning:
[How to Be a Suicide-Prevention Battle Buddy](#)
Be a non-judgmental friend
Listen
Ask if the person is thinking of suicide
Get help
Stay with the person until help arrives

¹⁴ My Army Benefits. [https://myarmybenefits.us.army.mil/Benefit-Library/Federal-Benefits/Army-Suicide-Prevention-Program-\(SP2\)?serv=121](https://myarmybenefits.us.army.mil/Benefit-Library/Federal-Benefits/Army-Suicide-Prevention-Program-(SP2)?serv=121). Downloaded February 2, 2023.

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