



Release No. 18-04-16

April 16, 2018

Contact: Sarah Marshall, Office of
External Affairs

Email: sarah.marshall@usuhs.edu

Early First Deployment, or Short Time Between Deployments, Increases Risk for Attempting Suicide in Soldiers

Bethesda, Md. – Soldiers who deploy twice in one year, with six months or less between each deployment, could be at an increased risk for attempted suicide during or after their second deployment, according to a new study published April 18 in *JAMA Psychiatry*. While the study looked at soldiers, these findings have implications for other services and the national issue of suicide.

The study, “Associations of Time-Related Deployment Variables with Risk of Suicide Attempt Among Soldiers,” was conducted by the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USU), in collaboration with the University of California San Diego, Harvard Medical School, and the University of Michigan. In an effort to continue identifying risk factors for suicide and suicide-related behavior in the military, the researchers decided to look at whether length of deployment, time between deployments, and amount of time in service before a first deployment, might subsequently influence risk for suicide attempt – elements few other studies have explored.

The researchers analyzed Army and Department of Defense administrative records between 2004 and 2009, comparing nearly 600 soldiers with a medically documented suicide attempt, to 19,034 other soldiers. Among those soldiers, those who served 12 months or less prior to their first deployment were about twice as likely to attempt suicide during or after their second deployment. This was in comparison to those who had more time to train and acclimate to the military before their initial deployment. The risk for suicide attempt also appeared to increase as the amount of time between deployments decreased.

For some soldiers, the researchers suggest an inadequate amount of time between deployments could mean less time to readjust, leading them to experience challenges like insomnia, irritability, or difficulty concentrating. Making sure soldiers have longer amounts of time between deployments would help decrease rates of stress and anxiety, but just how much time would be optimal? More research is needed, said Dr. Robert Ursano, director of the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress at USU. But, it appears at least six months is critical to protecting soldier health.

The researchers also suggest the risk for suicide attempts could be reduced by as much as 14.2 percent if all soldiers were in the Army for more than a year prior to their first deployment, and more than six

months between deployments could also result in a four percent reduction in suicide attempts among those who have deployed twice.

“These findings highlight the importance of preparation and a rest-recovery period between deployments, in preventing suicide attempts – and these are risk factors we can modify,” Ursano said.

Along with Ursano, the team of researchers included a co-principal investigator from the University of California San Diego, site principal investigators from Harvard Medical School, and the University of Michigan, and support from the U.S. Army Public Health Center.

The study was part of the Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers – Longitudinal Study (STARRS-LS), a research project led by Ursano, running from 2015 to 2020. The project is designed to provide actionable information to reduce suicide-related behavior, and other mental/behavioral health issues in the military. It also expands the work of Army STARRS, the largest research study of mental health risk and resilience ever conducted among Army personnel, running from 2009 through 2015.

Army STARRS was sponsored by the Department of the Army and funded under cooperative agreement number U01MH087981 (2009-2015) with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Mental Health (NIH/NIMH). Subsequently, STARRS-LS was sponsored and funded by the Department of Defense (USUHS grant number HU001-15-2-0004).

###

About USU

The Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USU), founded by an act of Congress in 1972, is the academic heart of the Military Health System. USU students are primarily active-duty uniformed officers in the Army, Navy, Air Force and Public Health Service who receive specialized education in tropical and infectious diseases, TBI and PTSD, disaster response and humanitarian assistance, global health, acute trauma care, and advanced practice nursing and dentistry. For more information, visit www.usuhs.edu.