

Short-term psychological therapy dramatically reduces suicide attempts among at-risk soldiers

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Short-term cognitive behavioral therapy dramatically reduces suicide attempts among at-risk military personnel, according to findings from a research study that included investigators from The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio.

The two-year study, funded by the Army's Military Operational Medicine Research Program, was conducted at Fort Carson, Colo. It involved 152 active-duty soldiers who had either attempted suicide or had been determined to be at high risk for suicide, and evaluated the effectiveness of a brief cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) in preventing future suicide attempts.

The study found that soldiers receiving CBT were 60 percent less likely to make a [suicide attempt](#) during the 24-month follow-up than those receiving standard treatment. The results were published online Friday, Feb. 13, by *The American Journal of Psychiatry*.

The findings are particularly encouraging, given that rates of active-duty service members receiving psychiatric diagnoses increased by more than 60 percent during a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Rates of suicides and suicide attempts rose in comparable numbers.

"The significant increase in military suicides over the past decade is a national tragedy," said Alan Peterson, Ph.D., a co-investigator on the

study who is a professor of psychiatry in the School of Medicine at the UT Health Science Center San Antonio and director of the military-focused STRONG STAR Consortium. "The Department of Defense has responded by investing significant resources into military suicide research, and the findings from this study may be the most important and most hopeful to date. To see a 60 percent reduction in suicide attempts among at-risk active-duty soldiers after a brief intervention is truly exciting," Dr. Peterson said.

Other UT Health Science Center investigators from the STRONG STAR Consortium included Stacey Young-McCaughan, RN, Ph.D., and Jim Mintz, Ph.D. STRONG STAR, an international research group led by the Health Science Center, supported this study as part of its larger effort to develop and test the best diagnoses, preventions and treatments for combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder and related conditions.

M. David Rudd, Ph.D., president of the University of Memphis, and Craig Bryan, Psy.D., a clinical psychologist at the University of Utah and executive director of the National Center for Veterans Studies, led the study.

"We're very pleased with the very positive results of this clinical trial, particularly that we've been able to develop and implement a treatment that helps improve the lives of our soldiers," Dr. Rudd said.

"The treatment is focused on how to manage stress more effectively, how to think in more helpful ways and how to remember what is meaningful in life. In essence, the soldier learns how to live a life worth living in a very short period of time," Dr. Bryan said.

"This landmark achievement is the result of several years' effort by researchers at three universities, the Department of Defense and an exceptional team of Army behavioral health providers at Fort Carson,"

Dr. Bryan continued. "Most importantly, we extend our sincere gratitude to those soldiers who volunteered to participate in this study. Although these soldiers did not know if they would personally benefit from participation, they nonetheless volunteered with the hope that the outcome would benefit other [soldiers](#) and service members. I think we can confidently say that they have achieved their objective."

Dr. Peterson of the UT Health Science Center added, "The excellent research partnerships between the University of Memphis, the University of Utah, the UT Health Science Center at San Antonio and Evans Army Community Hospital at Fort Carson contributed to the success of this project."

More information: The article is available online at <http://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/>.

Provided by University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio

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