be ashamed about having depression. “Depression is a serious illness; it’s not something where people can pull themselves up by their bootstraps and move on,” she said. “In a lot of cases, it’s a brain disorder. Stigma is terrible. No wants to admit they’re depressed. It tends to make them not want to seek help for their depression.”

**Publicly available data**

The series examines suicidal ideation, severe depression, psychosis and trauma, and will ultimately provide publicly available data to help community and public health leaders make informed decisions about resourcing and expanding access to mental health care, according to MHA.

At the end of 2021, MHA anticipates the release of a publicly available dashboard where individuals can obtain information about the counts and rates of suicide, severe depression, psychosis and trauma in their counties.

The severe depression data presented throughout this report represents the minimum number of individuals who are struggling with severe depression for the first time, MHA stated. Before initiating care with a mental health professional or at a primary care clinic, individuals are likely to turn to the internet to seek information and solutions about their concerns, the organization stated.

---

**Study examines suicide ideation among vets during COVID-19**

Observing that the COVID-19 pandemic has raised considerable concerns about increased risk for suicidal behavior among U.S. military veterans, who already had elevated rates of suicide prior to the pandemic, researchers found that a small proportion of veterans developed new-onset suicide ideation during the pandemic.

The study, “Prevalence and Trends in Suicidal Behavior Among US Military Veterans During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” was published Aug. 25 in *JAMA Psychiatry*.

The new research is the first nationally representative study of veterans to examine changes in the prevalence of suicidal ideation from pre- to peri-pandemic, researchers said.

**Bottom Line…**

*The new research is the first nationally representative study of veterans to examine changes in the prevalence of suicidal ideation from pre- to peri-pandemic, researchers said.*

The overarching goal of our study was to examine changes in suicidal behavior among U.S. military veterans from pre- to peri-pandemic,” said Nichter. “Specifically, our study had three aims: (1) to examine the change in suicidal ideation from pre-pandemic to peri-pandemic, (2) to examine the prevalence of new-onset suicide attempts nearly one year into the pandemic and (3) to examine risk factors for new-onset suicidal ideation during the pandemic.”

Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has upended the lives of individuals across the globe. At the time of this writing, more than 177 million people have been infected and 3.8 million have died as a result of COVID-19-related complications globally.

According to researchers, several lines of evidence suggest U.S. military veterans may be a population at disproportionately higher risk for suicidality during the pandemic. First, older veterans were already at high risk for loneliness prior to the pandemic, which has been implicated as a robust correlate of suicide ideation and attempt.

Second, veterans have high rates of preexisting mental illness (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder, depression) and suicidal behavior relative to the general population, which may predispose them to deterioration in mental health during the pandemic, the study stated.

Nichter noted that the reasons for pursuing this study were because U.S. military veterans represent a population who are at especially high risk for suicide, with the most recent national data from the Veterans Administration showing veterans...
Continued from previous page

are 50% more likely to die by suicide compared to civilians.

“The purpose of our study was to examine changes in suicidal behavior among veterans during the pandemic, as there has been a significant amount of concern from the public health community that these factors might increase suicidal behavior among the veteran population, who were already at high risk for suicide prior to the pandemic,” said Nichter.

He added, “The COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial impact on the lives of U.S. citizens, including veterans, due to increased financial hardship, unemployment, COVID-19-related grief and stress, and loneliness due to social distancing restrictions, among other factors.”

Study method

Data was from the first and second wave of the 2019–20 National Health and Resilience in Veterans Study. Median dates of data collection for the pre-pandemic and peri-pandemic assessments were Nov. 21, 2019, and Nov. 14, 2020, nearly 10 months after the start of the COVID-19 public health emergency in the United States.

This prospective cohort study surveyed a nationally representative sample of 3,078 veterans ages 22 to 99. The average age of veterans in the study was 63.2.

Veterans were assessed at two time points — a few months prior to the start of the pandemic (November 2019, on average) and nearly 10 months into the pandemic (November 2020, on average), said Nichter. “At both time points, veterans were asked how often they had thought about killing themselves during the prior year, as well as whether they had actually made a suicide attempt in the prior year,” he said.

Results

Past-year suicide ideation decreased from 10.6% pre-pandemic to 7.8% peri-pandemic. A total of 2.6% (82) of veterans developed new-onset suicide ideation over the follow-up period. After adjusting for sociodemographic and military characteristics, the strongest risk factors and COVID-19-related correlates for new-onset suicide ideation were low social support, suicide attempt history, lifetime post-traumatic stress disorder and/or depression, alcohol use disorder severity and worsening of social relationships during the pandemic.

The small proportion of veterans who developed new-onset suicide ideation during the pandemic was largely driven by low social connectedness and psychiatric and suicide attempt histories prior to the pandemic. Veterans who were infected with COVID-19 were more than twice as likely to report suicide ideation, above and beyond psychiatric and demographic factors, underscoring the need for future research to examine the potential link between COVID-19 infection and suicidal behavior.

Clinical implications

“I think there are two major clinical implications from our study,” said Nichter. “First, although we found that the rate of suicidal ideation decreased in the overall veteran population from pre- to peri-pandemic, a small subset of veterans (2.6%) — representing more than 475,000 veterans nationwide — developed new-onset suicidal ideation during the pandemic, signaling the need for increased suicide prevention and outreach efforts to help veterans that may be struggling during the pandemic.”

Nichter added that the study findings highlight the complexity in understanding how different populations may respond to the pandemic. “For example, at the start of the pandemic, I think a lot of folks had the impression that the pandemic would have a uniformly negative impact on mental health across the population,” he stated. “However, the results of our investigation suggest that there may be significant heterogeneity in the way in which different individuals and different populations respond to the pandemic.”

“It is also important to note, said Nichter, that while the study found a decrease in suicidal ideation in the overall veteran population 10 months into the pandemic, it is possible that this may change in the future, especially given that the pandemic is ongoing. “We plan to follow this cohort of veterans over the next year to examine further potential changes in suicidal behavior and mental health,” he said.

‘We plan to follow this cohort of veterans over the next year to examine further potential changes in suicidal behavior and mental health.’
Brandon Nichter, Ph.D.

Practice from page 1

she said, “We therapists usually just like to do therapy.”

History of startup

Grow Therapy (https://growtherapy.com) offers one example of an organization seeking to respond to market developments both prior to and during the pandemic. Company co-founder and CEO Jake Cooper told MHW that he and his two partners in the venture were driven originally by a pair of related factors: shortcomings in insurance coverage for clinical mental health care and the resulting difficulty some of their own loved ones had experienced in