

# Reaching Hidden Suicide Risk in Military Units

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This document outlines a new approach to military suicide prevention that addresses a critical gap: reducing suicide risk among service members whose suicide concerns are not disclosed or otherwise identified. This overview focuses on the innovative strategy and evidence behind the Connect Program's peer network-based approach. Comprehensive program details are available separately.

## The Critical Gap in Military Suicide Prevention

Most military suicide deaths occur among personnel who are not identified as high-risk and are not receiving mental health care. In the Active Component in 2023:

- 58% had no behavioral health diagnosis
- Two-thirds received no mental health services in the 90 days before death

These "hidden suicidal members" remain outside traditional prevention efforts despite having:

- Active suicidal thoughts
- Significant emotional difficulties
- Social isolation
- Unmet prevention needs

## Limitations of Current Prevention Strategies

Traditional military suicide prevention centers on health services through:

- Encouraging help-seeking behavior
- Reducing stigma of mental health services
- Improving treatment effectiveness
- Teaching individual coping skills
- Offering self-help resources and apps

These approaches, while undoubtedly saving lives and essential to continue, face fundamental limitations. Most military suicide deaths occur among personnel who have not accessed mental health care in the months before death. Many suicidal members are reluctant to seek help, while others show few recognizable warning signs or have risk factors that don't match traditional screening criteria. Even with reduced stigma and improved access, an individually-focused treatment approach cannot reach all members who need protection. **A new approach is needed to reduce suicide risk without requiring identification of individual members at high-risk.**

# Connect Program: A New Approach to Risk Reduction

The Connect Program **strengthens the natural peer networks that protect and support all unit members** - a fundamentally different approach to suicide prevention that builds unit-wide protective factors while providing the greatest help to those at highest risk.

Developed as **Wingman-Connect** through a 10-year collaboration between the University of Rochester and the Department of Air Force (DoD funded 2014-2023), this program delivers six hours of interactive group training followed by six months of text/video reinforcement and team booster activities. Through this structured approach, members develop essential individual and group skills across four core strengths (Kinship, Purpose, Guidance, and Balance), learning through interactive exercises that make skills practical and memorable.

- Members develop skills essential for mental health, resilience and job fitness
- Groups build stronger peer networks and healthy practices that contribute to operational effectiveness
- Creates multiple channels of protection and support through enhanced unit cohesion
- Those at highest risk benefit the most from this approach

Rather than depending solely on individual help-seeking or risk identification, the program strengthens the everyday relationships and unit culture that research shows are crucial for preventing suicide. The program demonstrates how stronger peer networks benefit both unit readiness and individual protection - especially for members who might otherwise remain disconnected from support.

## Key Evidence: Direct Impact on Existing Risk

A gold-standard randomized controlled trial with 1,500 Air Force early-career personnel demonstrated that Wingman-Connect significantly reduced suicide risk, depressive symptoms, and occupational problems (Wyman et al., 2020). Program participants showed improved mental health outcomes and 50% fewer incidents requiring corrective training.

Importantly, the trial revealed a crucial finding about how the program works: Wingman-Connect embedded members into a cohesive peer network unified around healthy practices. This process had an out-sized effect that benefitted suicidal members by preventing their typical trajectory of becoming increasingly isolated over time (Wyman et al., 2022). Specifically:

- Members with elevated suicide risk in untrained units showed increasing isolation from peers over time
- The same high-risk profile members in Wingman-Connect trained units increased in their healthy peer connections
- This prevention of isolation occurred without identifying which members were at risk
- The program's positive effects were strongest among those who needed it most

This evidence demonstrates that the Connect Program is not only an "upstream" prevention program that "gets to the left of problems" – it also **actively addresses existing suicide risk among members who would otherwise remain hidden and become more isolated.**

## Why This Peer Group Approach Works for At-Risk Members

Developed as a military-specific program with input from early career personnel and leaders, the program was designed to ensure alignment with member motivations and needs.

- 1. Participant Role is Acceptable and Meaningful**
  - Members participate as teammates, not patients
  - Training occurs within normal duty settings
  - Role aligns with military values and career development
- 2. Strengthens the Group to Strengthen the Individual**
  - Builds protective peer networks within existing units
  - Reduces isolation among at-risk members naturally, without singling anyone out
  - Creates shared healthy coping practices
  - Those at highest risk gain the most benefit
- 3. Prevention Through Mission Enhancement**
  - Integrates prevention directly into unit functioning
  - Strengthens both readiness and protective factors
  - Creates lasting culture change through military structures
  - Makes prevention sustainable by improving mission capability

### Scientific Foundation

Research demonstrates that relationship networks are intimately connected to suicide risk and protection (Cero, De Choudhury, Wyman, 2023), specifically:

- Peer relationships fulfill essential psychological needs
- Group cohesion creates collective responsibility for member well-being
- Social norms shape healthy behavior and coping strategies
- Network enhancement particularly benefits those with the greatest need

## Reducing Critical Barriers in Military Suicide Prevention

The Connect Program addresses several critical barriers in current suicide prevention:

- 1. Reaches Hidden Risk**
  - Works without requiring members to self-identify as struggling
  - Benefits at-risk members through natural peer interactions
  - Creates protective environments that support all members
- 2. Eliminates Access Barriers While Improving Performance**
  - Delivered in standard work and training settings
  - No special referral or help-seeking required; avoids stigma of mental health services
  - Maintains career and role confidence
  - Reduces occupational problems by 50%
- 3. Sustainable Implementation**
  - Integrates with existing military structures
  - Improves both prevention and readiness
  - Creates lasting cultural change
  - Builds on military strengths and values through practical skills development

## Building Protective Networks Across Settings: Program Adaptability

Ongoing projects with law enforcement and other civilian settings suggest the Connect Program can be successfully adapted to other high-stress environments and career stages while maintaining its core protective components. Implementation with civilian law enforcement demonstrated strong engagement, acceptability, and relevance (Pisani et al., under review), with context-specific content emerging naturally through participant interactions. This adaptability suggests strong potential for broader implementation to enhance protective networks.

## Conclusion: A Critical Tool for Comprehensive Prevention

The Connect Program provides military leaders with a powerful new capability to reduce suicide deaths by:

- Directly addressing risk among members who won't be identified through traditional means
- Creating protective environments that benefit all members, with strongest effects for those at highest risk
- Strengthening unit functioning while preventing isolation of vulnerable members
- Complementing existing clinical services with a population-level approach that reaches hidden suicidal members

This evidence-based program demonstrates that we can reduce suicide risk without requiring individual identification of risk – a crucial breakthrough for reaching the majority of military members who need prevention but do not access traditional services.

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