

Protective factors for suicidal ideation and attempted suicides among Danish veteran soldiers returned from international missions

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Introduction:

The Danish Defence has been engaged in diverse international operations in e.g. Ex-Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. The international missions have become ever more risky. An increasing number of soldiers suffer from serious emotional delayed reactions such as PTSD, depressions, suicidal ideation, attempted and completed suicides. Based on this, the research project "Risk and protective factors for suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviour among Danish veteran soldiers stationed abroad" was initiated in 2008. Data collection continues in order to obtain updated information on soldiers returning from international missions.

Objective:

The overall objective of this research project is to uncover, analyse and illuminate risk and protective factors for suicidal ideation and attempted suicides among Danish soldiers returned from international missions.

Method:

A triangular research method is applied:

- Register-based research
- Survey based on questionnaires
- Interview study

The present results are based on the interview study of soldiers who have been under fire, or whose camp has been under fire, and who have suffered from suicidal ideation or have attempted to commit suicide.

Implementation and participants

In total, 100 soldiers have been interviewed consisting of a semi-structured questionnaire that include the following themes

- Reasons for accepting the mission
- Considerations of risks
- Hope
- Life philosophy, faith, religion, spirituality
- Values
- Contact with friends and family from childhood, youth, years at the university, or other phases of life?
- Recommendations for protection against mental sufferings, suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviour

Of the interviewees who suffer from suicidal ideation, 65, 2 % have children, 46 % are single, 34 % are married or in a civil partnership, 2 % are separated, 16 % are divorced and 2 % are widows or widowers

Of the interviewees who have attempted suicide, 52, 1 % have children, 30 % are single, 60 % are married or in a civil partnership, 10 % are separated.

Both groups have been dispatched on a total of 17 missions; the majority at the Balkans. Fewer have been to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Results:

Results show that relations with family and friends and staying in touch with family and friends from childhood, youth, or other phases of life are an important protective factor against suicidal ideation and attempted suicides. Other protective factors are being aware of which values one prioritizes the highest and being aware of one's life philosophy. Also, hope is important for the soldiers prior to, during and after the mission.