

‘We Desperately Need to Solve the Problem of Suicide’

A Marine and Iraq War veteran has spent the last 15 years studying suicide and mental health within the military and veterans’ communities, and his sobering research underlines flaws in a system created to help prevent those at risk

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During his second deployment to Iraq with the 1st Marine Regiment Personal Security Detachment in 2008, Seth Allard grew conscious of the alarming behavior around him.

Allard had deployed earlier in 2005 with 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment to Al Anbar province for operations Steel Curtain and Iron Hammer, but the behavioral patterns among his fellow infantry and combat units had been peripheral until now.

“I started noticing there was a hesitance among many Marines to seek help with anger, anxiety and behavioral issues,” said Allard, a member of VFW Post 827 in Kalamazoo, Michigan. “I could, as Marines could, tell you unbelievable stories on how we interacted with the mental health care system and how it was largely absent, resulting in an almost everyday occurrence of behavioral problems.”

Allard, who deals with post-traumatic stress disorder, began ravaging books on the subject and set out to make a difference. His growing awareness about mental health problems led to his article, “Adapt and Overcome: A Psychological Battle,” in the *Marine Corps Gazette* in October 2009, written between missions and a “rare accomplishment” by a corporal at the time, according to Allard.

“I realized Marines were not given the skills, knowledge and proper infrastructure to address their problems and be most successful,” said Allard, who served from 2004 to 2009. “Mental health can be a good thing, too, not just a topic of disease. I am hoping to change that.”

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‘I STUDY THOSE WHO STUDY SUICIDE’

The Iraq War veteran, whose experience includes being a military spouse, attended Western Michigan University after his service to earn his bachelor’s degree in history and a master’s in anthropology. He has since spent 15 years working in social services, mental health and suicide prevention, as well as researching and applying his experience and insights toward mental health and suicide prevention among veterans and Native American communities.

Allard says his approach to preventing veterans’ suicide differs from the research used and applied by the military today. That model, he argues, erases the lived experiences of veterans through anonymous statistics and infographics. Instead, Allard believes in a philosophy of placing the identity, cultural values and everyday issues that fellow veterans face at the epicenter of research and collaboration.

As a doctoral student of social work at Wayne State University in Detroit, Allard published “Cultural Problems Require Cultural Solutions: Partnership between Anthropology and the U.S. Marine Corps to Prevent Suicide,” in the *Marine Corps University Press* in March 2022. In the article, Allard provides substantial evidence supporting his views on the proper way to conduct research in hopes of preventing suicide and enhancing mental health.

“Everyone in the research and prevention community agrees that we desperately need to solve the problem of suicide in our military and veteran community, and that suicide is a complex, multifaceted issue,” said Allard, a Dean’s Diversity Fellow and Robert Wood Johnson Health Policy Research Scholar. “But this consensus is betrayed by the fact that the research and prevention community, as well as military and civilian leadership, overall, continue to apply the same approaches to suicide.”

Allard has worked with at-risk youths and individuals with developmental disabilities. He is well-versed in suicide prevention programs and the training of community members in mental health, which gives him a unique perspective against suicide. He has talked with military leaders and worked within the VA healthcare system to incorporate his ideas, but they have remained hesitant because Allard believes his ideas challenge the status quo. *(Editor’s Note: Allard’s views are his own, and they do not reflect the official views or position of the VA.)*

“I do not just study suicides, but I study those who study suicide,” Allard said. “Academia itself is a culture, and there are two types of researchers involved in public health. Some prioritize publishing results and career advancement, and others are servant intellectuals.

“They prioritize the well-being of the communities that they serve. That conflicts with their career advancement, but they choose community over career.”

‘LISTEN TO THEIR EXPERIENCES’

Amassing substantial information to support this contention in his published article in

Marine Corps University Press last year, Allard believes career-advancing researchers have been dominating the suicide research in the military for more than two decades.

“Something is clearly wrong if the suicide rates remain high,” Allard said. “I am against turning a soldier into a medical experiment. What I see is that my fellow veterans and service members are not really being heard. I believe in being with veterans and listening to their experiences with mental health and the VA. The sad truth is that the research right now dictates how resources are spent, and the wrong research blocks the true prevention.”

Allard added that his approach begins before service members enter the military. He says many enlist with emotional challenges and that Marines, in particular, are at higher risk than those in other military services. Knowing this, Allard has continued to try and establish communication with the Marine Corps and the Pentagon to implement strategies to help Marines before they begin training to become one.

“Truly preventative measures [would] introduce mental health the first day,” Allard said. “I believe in evidence-supported training for future Marines in their communities, so they know and understand how to grasp mental health challenges before they go through their careers. And this also applies to their transition out of the military. The military’s transition assistance program is bureaucratic, and even those working in the system know it is harmful. You cannot learn everything about transitioning back to civilian life in a week.”

In hopes of spreading these views, Allard has reached out to news outlets and politicians. With an overwhelming saturation of research on military and veterans’ suicide, however, his haste in a dissenting approach to the status quo is what brought him to VFW.

“I know the strong presence VFW has in government and their support of research and suicide awareness on behalf of veterans,” Allard said. “That is why I reached out. I hope this can be used to lobby for more effective research.”

Allard plans to continue his aggressive campaign for suicide prevention, one that prioritizes the culture and lived experiences of those at risk.

“I’m a researcher and social worker, but at the end of the day, I am still a Marine infantryman trained to locate, close with, and destroy the enemy,” Allard said. “I keep that mindset close throughout my research, outreach, teaching and advocating for prevention, writing or counseling. I simply have a new objective — preventing suicide and addressing the problems within suicide research.”

This article is featured in the 2023 April issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.