

Firearm Leadership: Actions to Reduce the Risk of Suicide and Harm

Firearms are an essential tool for many service members in military operations and also a part of sports and hunting for many. The safe handling and storage of firearms is critical to the safety of service members and their families. Leaders influence service members not only on the battlefield but also in their personal lives. “Firearm Leadership” involves knowing the risks and taking actions to prevent firearm injuries, both during routine daily operations and acute situations when you are concerned about a service member’s safety.

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Do You Know?

- Almost all firearm deaths in garrison are self-inflicted
- Suicide death by firearms often occurs without warning
- It’s difficult to know who or when a person will attempt suicide
- Not everyone who dies by suicide looks sad, angry, anxious, or talks about wanting to end their life
- Military children die of accidental firearm incidents

Firearm Leadership Actions

Actions to promote Firearm Leadership include educating service members and role modeling personal firearm practices that reduce risk:

- Discuss Personal Firearms Storage
 - ❑ Talk about personal firearm safety with all personnel
 - ❑ Encourage storing personally owned firearms unloaded and locked in a case or gun safe when not in use
 - ❑ Promote storing and locking ammunition in a separate location
- Discourage Alcohol Use When Using Firearms
 - ❑ Practice zero tolerance mixing alcohol with handling weapons
 - ❑ Communicate clearly: “Don’t mix alcohol with your firearms”

Alternatives to Firearms for Protection

Remind personnel of options for personal and home safety that are safer than unlocked weapons. These include:

- Alarm systems

- Pepper spray
- Stun guns and tasers
- Pocket and tactical knives
- Guard dogs

Promote Family Safety

- ❑ Inform service members that while a loaded and unlocked firearm at home might make them feel safer, it greatly increases risk of accidental injury or impulsive shooting death
- ❑ Recommend keeping firearms out of the reach of children
- ❑ Remind personnel to teach children that firearms are not toys and should only be handled when supervised by a trained adult

Steps to Take When You Are Concerned

A leader may feel concerned when a service member is “not acting like themselves.” When going through a tough time, having access to a firearm increases the risk of impulsive self-harm. How a leader responds can save a life:

- Be compassionate and genuine in your approach
- Tell the person you are there to help
- When time permits, seek advice from behavioral health and chaplain teams
- Escort the person to emergency care
- If firearms are present, offer to store them away from home until the situation improves
- Protect the service member’s personal information and quickly address rumors

Resources

Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Call or text 988

Military OneSource

1-800-342-9647

The Firearm Industry Trade Association

<https://www.nssf.org/articles/securely-storing-firearms-in-the-home/>

Defense Suicide Prevention Office Lethal

Means Safety Guide

<https://www.dspo.mil/Tools/Resource-Library/lethalmeanssafety/>

