

PTSD Bytes – Transcript

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| Episode #: | 46 |
| Topic: | Lethal Means Safety and PTSD |
| Guest: | Joseph Simonetti, MD, MPH |
| Working title: | PTSD and Reducing Suicide Risk |

Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Welcome to the PTSD Bytes podcast, where we talk to experts about post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health, and how technology like mobile mental health apps can help. This is your host, Dr. Colleen Beckett-Davenport, clinical psychologist at the Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD. On today's episode, we'll be talking about lethal means safety, a voluntary and intentional practice that you can use to reduce suicide risk. I'm joined today by Dr. Joseph Simonetti, who is an addiction medicine physician and clinician investigator with the VA Rocky Mountain Mental Illness Research Education and Clinical Center, or MIRECC for Suicide Prevention. He's also the director of mentorship and education for the Firearm Injury Prevention Initiative at the University of Colorado Anschutz medical campus. Welcome Dr. Simonetti.

Joseph Simonetti:

Thank you for having me. I'm glad to be here.

Colleen Becket-Davenport:

In December of 2023, we had Dr. Greg Brown on the podcast to talk about suicide prevention, and he let us know that access to lethal means can increase someone's risk of suicide. So, can you offer us a refresher on this term? What exactly are lethal means?

Joseph Simonetti:

That's a great question. A lethal mean or a lethal method is any item that an individual can use to harm themselves with, like a firearm, a belt or a rope or something like a sharp object such as a knife, for example.

Colleen Becket-Davenport:

I see. And when someone is at risk of suicide, why would it be important for them to reduce their access to lethal means?

Joseph Simonetti:

When someone's at risk of suicide, there are a lot of different things that we do to try and address their suicide risk and try and keep them safe of those many things. One of those things we often talk to folks about is for them to think about taking steps to reduce their access to those lethal methods that we just talked about. So for instance, firearms, the reason we do that is oftentimes suicide attempts can come on in the midst of an emotional crisis. Something happens to somebody and they go from a normal state of healthy affairs to feeling desperate and not having an answer to the problem that they're currently facing. And, and that's just one of the circumstances in which individuals start to think about harming themselves.

Joseph Simonetti:

It's in those moments of crisis that we really worry about what happens to individuals. And again, as we talked about earlier, one of the things that's necessary for an individual to die by suicide is for them to have access to one of these lethal methods. And so in the midst of a crisis, if somebody has already taken steps to reduce their access to these lethal methods, they're more likely to survive that crisis and go on to live a normal life.

Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Dr. Brown also shared that PTSD and other mental health conditions can also increase someone's risk of dying by suicide. So it does seem particularly important that people with PTSD consider reducing their access to lethal methods.

Joseph Simonetti:

It is. One of the mental health conditions that we know is particularly highly prevalent among American Veteran population and is also associated with increased suicide risk is post-traumatic stress disorder. And so one of the things that we try and encourage clinically when somebody is going through a difficult time in managing or having treatment for their post-traumatic stress is that they also make decisions about how to secure their home environment. That includes things like reducing access to opioid medications, reducing access to firearms.

Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Alright, so far we've talked about why it's important to reduce access to lethal means or methods, and now let's talk about the how. So if someone's in a situation where they fear that they may be a danger to themselves, what are some ways they can choose to reduce their access to objects that pose a risk to their safety?

Joseph Simonetti:

That's a really great question. It really depends on the different types of both lethal methods that they might have available to them and the lethal methods that they might have thought about using or have used in the past. When it comes to things like medication and drug overdose, one of the simplest things to do is to get rid of all the expired or excess supplies of medications. The VA will actually mail you medication return envelopes to get rid of some of these excess medications. Another thing that we talk about too, given that opioids, like for instance, oxycodone or fentanyl, are associated with increased suicide risk as well as increased unintentional overdose risk. Now at pharmacies across the country and certainly in any VA pharmacy or VA facility, we can prescribe a medication called Naloxone. It is also called Narcan. This is a medication that prevents opioid overdose when somebody is taking too much one of those medications.

Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And how about firearms?

Joseph Simonetti:

When it comes to firearms, there are a lot of different steps that individuals can decide to take. The most protective step that somebody can take when they have increased suicide risk is for them to decide to take their firearms out of their home and store them in a trusted location. This could be at a firearm range or a retail setting that offers storage for customers or even non-customers in some cases. This could be with a friend or a family member or a neighbor, although there are obviously some caveats

to how one can legally transfer firearms to others in the United States. In some cases, some folks just aren't going to be ready or aren't going to be willing to consider removing their firearms from their household, even temporarily. It's important to note though, that this happens pretty commonly. I think you could sit down really in any American Legion and start talking to folks about some hard times that other Veterans have been through, and many times you're going to hear a story about them doing something to support one another, such as, you know, storing their firearms temporarily for them.

Joseph Simonetti:

But again, that doesn't work for everybody. There are some things that can be encouraged within the household that is also likely to reduce suicide risk. And that could be storing firearms in a locked location like using a lockbox or a firearm safe or a firearm cabinet that could be storing firearms unloaded with ammunition or a combination of those two things.

Colleen Becket-Davenport:

What are some of the challenges in encouraging patients with PTSD to reduce their access to firearms?

Joseph Simonetti:

That's a really important question. You know, I think of this in, in two separate ways. One is in which there are challenges that are specific to individuals who are dealing with post-traumatic stress. And then the other are challenges that many people face regardless of whether or not they have PTSD. And you know, the reality is that people just attach a lot of value to their firearms.

Joseph Simonetti:

And so encouraging them to make changes with their relationship with firearms can be a very challenging thing. When it comes to folks with post-traumatic stress, some of the symptoms that can come along with this condition are this sense of threat coming from elsewhere or of constantly being on guard. The most common reason that Americans say they have guns in their house is to keep themselves protected from other people. If you combine that with these post-traumatic symptoms, you can see how that would lead some folks not only storing their firearms in different ways from people who don't have post-traumatic stress, but also being a little bit more hesitant to think about making some of these changes to the way that they store their guns.

Joseph Simonetti:

And that's not to say that patients with post-traumatic stress don't make these changes all the time, or the clinician should recommend it. I just think it's a uniquely more challenging obstacle when you're working with folks who have a different sense of things around them.

Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Yeah, that's understandable. So what might you say to someone who's hesitant to reduce access to firearms because they're afraid that they won't have them in the event that they need them to protect themselves?

Joseph Simonetti:

If someone's getting care for their post-traumatic stress or major depression or their drug use disorder, or because they have elevated suicide risk, I really want somebody to think hard about the last time that

they've truly, and I mean, truly had to use their firearms to keep themselves safe. Now, I know some folks are going to hear that and say, but hey doc, this has happened to me, right?

Joseph Simonetti:

So I, I did have this trauma, or I did have this terrible scenario happen to me. And I recognize that these things do happen and there are legitimate uses of firearms for self-defense that happened in America. The question is today in the office while you're getting treatment or you have a court date approaching next week, what do we really think is most likely to happen? I would really encourage folks, particularly folks who have had traumatic experiences, the kind of experience that lead to development of acute or post-traumatic stress disorders, to have that conversation with a clinician.

Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Do you have any recommendations for tools or resources for people who are interested in reducing their access to legal means?

Joseph Simonetti:

Yeah, I'll say first when it comes to things like medications and particularly opioid medications and drugs. Here we're talking about oxycodone, morphine, fentanyl. You can ask any local pharmacist or certainly any VA clinician or pharmacist to prescribe that medication I talked about earlier called Naloxone or called Narcan, which is something that reverses an opioid overdose, whether it's unintentional or it's related to a suicide attempt. I think that's a really important medication to have on hand.

Joseph Simonetti:

There's also medication disposal bins at nearly any pharmacy, a CVS, a Walgreens, any pharmacy in the VA or any clinic you go to in the VA is going to have these disposal bins. And so I think looking for those resources can be really useful. When it comes to firearms, as I said, for somebody with elevated suicide risk, the safest decision you can make is to have your firearm outside of the house. And there have been a number of programs that have been developed.

These are projects that have been developed so that when individuals need to get their firearms out of their house, they have a place to take them. So these are retailers who will not only give out secure storage devices, but also in many cases, store firearms for individuals who needs it. There's a website called Pierce's Pledge that was developed, which showed law enforcement and firearm retail settings that would hold onto firearms when individuals show up and needed help. Pierce's Pledge has really taken that national, so you can look to Pierce's pledge to see if there are firearm retail at shooting locations near you or near a clinical center near you in which folks are willing to hold onto firearms for people.

Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Do you have any digital tools that you can recommend to our listeners?

Joseph Simonetti:

Yeah, one that comes to mind is one that was actually developed by the VA, and it's not specific to Veterans, anyone can use it. It's the Safety Plan mobile app. And a safety plan is a six step resource that individuals can use, which helps them navigate suicidal thinking, suicidal urges. And one of the steps in

that step six is helping somebody come up with an identified plan to keep their environment safe, such as reducing access to firearms or opioid medications. The mobile app is really good. I mean, that is available for download and again, for Veterans, but also non-Veterans.

Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Well, unfortunately, that's all the time we have for today. Thank you so much for joining us, Dr. Simonetti.

Joseph Simonetti:

Thank you for having me. I really appreciate the opportunity to be here.

Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And as a reminder to our listeners, the Safety Plan app can be used by anyone, not just Veterans. The app is free and it can be downloaded from the App store or Google Play.

Andrea Jamison:

Hello, this is Andrea Jamison and I'm the executive producer of the PTSD Bytes Podcast. Catch new episodes by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Show notes and more information are on our website, www.ptsd.va.gov/podcast. Thank you for joining us.