

BC3 course focuses on preventing military veterans' suicide

March 4, 2020



Peter Albert is shown Feb. 24, 2020, in front of a mural inside the Butler VA Health Care System near Butler. Albert, suicide prevention coordinator at the Butler VA, will instruct Butler County Community College's new and free "Veteran Suicide: Suicide Prevention is Everyone's Business" course on BC3's main campus in Butler Township. The four-hour, noncredit course begins March 23.

(Butler, PA) Among Peter Albert's patients at the Butler VA Health Care System are those who tell him that they've known more fellow fighters who killed themselves than those they've known who were killed in combat.

Nearly 6,140 U.S. military veterans nationwide died by suicide in 2017, marking the 10th consecutive year in which the number exceeded 6,000, according to the VA's 2019 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report. Among them in 2017 were 254 from Pennsylvania.

Veterans who die by suicide, Albert added, may not have served in combat.

Butler County Community College on March 23 will offer a new and free “Veteran Suicide: Suicide Prevention is Everyone’s Business” course that addresses the warning signs exhibited by a struggling veteran and provides the resources available for help.

Albert, suicide prevention coordinator at the Butler VA Health Care System that serves veterans from primarily Armstrong, Butler, Clarion, Lawrence and Mercer counties, will instruct the four-hour noncredit course on BC3’s main campus from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. March 23 and March 30.

To register, visit bit.ly/bc3-veterans-health or call 724-287-8711 Ext. 8504.

While nearly 40,000 civilians killed themselves in the United States in 2017, military veterans die by suicide at a rate that is 1.5 times higher, according to the VA’s 2019 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report.

“There’s something about military service, whether you have served in combat or not, that is stressful,” Albert said, adding that a majority of the veterans who die by suicide have never sought counseling from the VA.

Upon discharge, “It’s a very stressful time for most veterans because the military is very structured,” said John Maze, a 1992 DuBois Area High School graduate and BC3 student-veteran who served 15 years in the Navy and earned the rank of chief petty officer.

“You have a lot of support around you in the military. If you have something going on in your life, the people around you in the military are going to notice. When you get out of the military, you don’t necessarily have that support. And sometimes that’s difficult.”

As could be having memories of combat – “having someone shoot at you, knowing people who have been killed,” Maze said.

BC3’s course, Albert said, aims to “support the veterans who are in people’s lives, and we want them to play a role in preventing suicide. We hope that by coming to these sessions, people will be able to identify someone who is at risk.”



Butler County Community College student-veteran John Maze is shown Feb. 21, 2020, on BC3’s main campus in Butler Township. The 1992 DuBois Area High School graduate served 15 years in the Navy and earned the rank of chief petty officer. BC3’s new and free “Veteran Suicide: Suicide Prevention is Everyone’s Business” course is important, Maze said, because “You have a lot of support around you in the military. If you have something going on in your life, the people around you in the military are going to notice. When you get out of the military, you don’t necessarily have that support. And sometimes that’s difficult.”

“Veteran Suicide: Suicide Prevention is Everyone’s Business” is the only free course among the more than 200 offered this spring by BC3’s Lifelong Learning, said Paul Lucas, director of the division.

“There are issues that impact veterans,” Lucas said, “and it’s good to have as many tools as you can to help the people in your family who might be experiencing difficulty or changes.”

Among warning signs that Albert will discuss that a military veteran might be contemplating suicide are his or her exhibiting hopelessness – “making statements about ‘You’ll miss me when I’m gone’ or ‘I can’t live like this anymore’” – anxiety, insomnia, increased use of intoxicants, social withdrawal and thoughtless risk-taking.

“Once they identify someone, they can’t be afraid to ask the question, ‘Are you thinking about killing yourself?’ And that’s stressful. It’s not one of those things we are prepared to do.”

To help prepare, those who attend “Veteran Suicide: Suicide Prevention is Everyone’s Business” will role-play in scenarios meant to help initiate the conversation, Albert said.

Friends and families of veterans will benefit from BC3’s course, Maze said.

“Oftentimes people who are struggling don’t know how to deal with it,” Maze said. “It’s important that friends and family are able to step in and point things out and direct people to help.”