



Military service teaches the importance of preparation. You prepare for the mission. You prepare for contingencies. You identify risks. You know your resources. You know who is responsible for what. You establish communication. You develop alternatives in case the original plan no longer works.

You do not wait until everything has gone wrong before deciding what to do.

That same principle applies to one of the most serious challenges a veteran may ever face: a personal crisis involving thoughts of suicide.

A **Suicide Safety Plan** is not a prediction that a crisis will occur. It is not an admission of weakness. It is not simply another mental-health worksheet. It is a practical plan created in advance, while thinking is clear, that identifies warning signs, coping actions, trusted people, professional resources, and specific steps to help a person stay safe when circumstances become overwhelming.

In its simplest form, a safety plan answers an important question:

If I reach a point where I am having difficulty thinking clearly or keeping myself safe, what have I already decided I will do?

That makes a safety plan a natural extension of the philosophy behind *Career Commands for Veterans*:

Prepare. Understand the environment. Use your strengths. Build your team. Take purposeful action. Protect your future.

Why This Belongs in Career Commands

Career Commands for Veterans began primarily as a resource for navigating the civilian workplace: resumes, interviews, career decisions, leadership, assessments, and the challenges veterans may encounter while transitioning from military service.

But transition has never been only about finding a job.

The current edition addresses career identity, adaptability, Emotional Intelligence, substance abuse, gambling risks, teamwork, leadership, rest, learning, future skills, and the importance of developing a vision for the future.

That broader perspective is important because military-to-civilian transition can involve much more than employment uncertainty.

Veterans may simultaneously experience financial pressure, relocation, changes in identity and purpose, loss of camaraderie and social support, isolation, loneliness, and emotional challenges. *Career Commands* describes this combination of gambling risks as a potential “perfect storm” during transition: the military environment provides structure, routine, teamwork, and clearly defined goals, while civilian transition can remove several of those stabilizing factors at once.

Elsewhere, *Career Commands* makes the point even more directly: transition is not simply a job search. It can require veterans to redefine identity, purpose, and long-term direction while adjusting to a rapidly changing civilian environment.

That broader reality is why suicide prevention belongs in this project.

Career success matters. Purpose matters. Financial stability matters. Relationships matter. Physical and emotional health matter.

And sometimes the most important Career Command is simply this:

Protect the person who will have that future.

A Serious Challenge—Without Making It Inevitable

Veteran suicide remains a serious national concern.

The *Veteran Suicide: A 12-2-60 Implications Wheel Scouting Journey* examined the issue from a veteran-centered perspective. The report identified persistent overrepresentation of veterans in suicide statistics, heightened vulnerability during the post-service period, the disproportionate role of firearms, and the influence of social and economic factors such as homelessness, poverty, and lack of social support.

Those facts deserve attention. But one of the most important lessons from the Implications Wheel exploration was a caution about **how** the issue is discussed.

One possible unintended consequence identified in the exploration was that constant messaging about veteran suicide could begin to normalize the problem. Veterans might hear repeated statistics so often that suicide begins to sound like a common or almost expected outcome of military service.

That is not the message this project should send.

The Implications Wheel analysis specifically warned that well-intentioned campaigns could contribute to hopelessness if suicide is framed as an inevitable or predictable consequence of being a veteran. It also identified the danger of message fatigue: communities and veterans themselves may eventually tune out repeated warnings, allowing real crisis signs to be overlooked.

The alternative is not to minimize the problem.

The alternative is to focus on **action, preparation, connection, recovery, purpose, and hope**.

This project starts with that assumption:

Veterans are not statistics. Suicide is not an inevitable outcome of military service. Difficult circumstances can change, crises can pass, and preparation can help create the time and connection necessary for that change to occur.

What the Implications Wheel Taught Us

The Veteran Suicide Scouting Journey identified several important paradigm shifts already occurring in suicide prevention. One is the shift from **reactive care to preventive care**, identifying risk and creating support before a crisis reaches its most dangerous point.

Another is the shift from relying exclusively on clinical institutions to a broader support ecosystem involving the VA, community organizations, peer networks, family members, and others who may be positioned to help.

A third is a movement away from viewing suicide solely through the lens of mental illness toward recognizing the importance of housing, economic security, trauma, reintegration stress, relationships, and other social circumstances.

And perhaps most importantly, the exploration identified a shift from **stigma to shared responsibility**: suicide prevention becomes something in which families, peers, communities, employers, and veterans themselves can all play a role.

Those ideas strongly support the concept of a personal safety plan.

A safety plan is preventive. A safety plan involves more than one person. A safety plan recognizes that a crisis can be affected by environment, relationships, circumstances, and access to dangerous means. **And a safety plan converts awareness into action.**

The Implications Wheel exploration also identified peer support as a particularly promising opportunity. Veteran peer communities can reduce isolation, increase belonging, create safe spaces for difficult conversations, and sometimes provide a bridge to professional care.

That idea will become an important part of the safety plan presented later in this guide:

Know your team before you need your team.

Emotional Intelligence: Recognizing the Change Before the Crisis

One of the strongest connections between this project and *Career Commands for Veterans* is **Emotional Intelligence**.

Emotional Intelligence is sometimes misunderstood as simply being “good with people” or being highly emotional. It is much broader than that.

At its core, Emotional Intelligence involves recognizing emotions in ourselves and others, understanding how those emotions affect behavior and decisions, managing our responses, and communicating effectively with other people.

These abilities have obvious career applications. They also have important personal applications.

The *Career Commands* discussion of Emotional Intelligence reviewed research examining the relationship between Emotional Intelligence and suicidal thinking and behavior. The research summarized there found an inverse relationship in most of the studies reviewed and raised the possibility that Emotional Intelligence should play a role in suicide-prevention efforts.

That does **not** mean Emotional Intelligence can prevent every crisis.

It does suggest something very practical: **The earlier we recognize that something is changing, the earlier we can act.**

A safety plan therefore begins with Emotional Intelligence—particularly **self-awareness**.

What happens to me when I begin moving toward a crisis? Do I stop sleeping? Do I withdraw? Do I stop answering messages? Does my anger increase? Do I drink more? Do I

become unusually impulsive? Do I stop exercising? Do I begin thinking that nothing will ever improve? Do I begin feeling like other people would be better off without me? Do I start giving things away? Do I become increasingly isolated?

These signs won't look the same for everyone. That's why a personal safety plan must be **personal**.

The first mission is learning to recognize **your** pattern.

Four Emotional Intelligence Skills That Support a Safety Plan

A useful way of connecting Emotional Intelligence to safety planning is through four basic capabilities.

Self-Awareness: What is happening to me right now?

Self-awareness means recognizing changes in thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, behaviors, and routines. It includes being able to say: "I am not doing as well as I was yesterday." "I am withdrawing." "My thinking is becoming more negative." "I am getting angry much more quickly." "I haven't slept." "I am beginning to think in ways that concern me."

Those observations can become the warning signs in a personal safety plan.

Self-Management: What can I do next that makes the situation safer?

Self-management does not mean simply telling yourself to "tough it out." It means having practical coping strategies ready before you need them. Exercise. Walking. Changing Locations. Breathing. Music. Working with your hands. Contacting someone. Going somewhere you will not be alone. Removing yourself from access to something dangerous. Using a strategy learned from a counselor or another professional.

The goal is not necessarily to solve every problem immediately.

Sometimes the first objective is much simpler:

Reduce the intensity. Create time. Create distance.

Social Awareness: Who around me is safe and trustworthy?

Veterans understand that a mission is rarely accomplished alone. The same principle matters here. Who notices when something is wrong? Who listens without immediately judging or trying to fix everything? Who understands you? Who would answer the phone? Who could sit with you? Who could drive you somewhere? Who could help secure

something dangerous? Who knows enough about you to recognize that “I’m fine” may not actually mean that you’re fine?

Identifying those people in advance is part of preparation.

Relationship Management: Can I clearly tell another person what I need?

One of the most difficult sentences to say may also be one of the most important:

“I’m not doing well, and I need you.”

A safety plan can make that conversation easier because the decision has already been made. Instead of deciding during a crisis whether to reach out, the veteran has already decided: **If X happens, I call Y.**

That is a very different decision. It was made earlier, when judgment was clearer.

Strength Does Not Mean Doing Everything Alone

Military culture rightly values resilience, perseverance, discipline, responsibility, and the ability to perform under pressure. Those characteristics can become enormous strengths in civilian life.

Career Commands repeatedly identifies qualities such as leadership under pressure, teamwork, adaptability, accountability, emotional control, and mission-focused execution as significant veteran strengths.

But every strength has limits. Resilience does not mean a person never struggles. Self-reliance does not mean refusing help. Discipline does not mean ignoring warning signs. Leadership does not mean carrying every burden alone.

In fact, effective leaders frequently do the opposite.

They assess the situation. They recognize when conditions have changed. They use resources. They communicate. They call for assistance when the situation exceeds their individual capacity.

Those are not failures of leadership. They **are leadership**.

That distinction is central to this project.

A Safety Plan Is a Mission Plan

There is a simple way to think about the pages that follow. A personal safety plan is a **mission plan for the difficult moments**.

It identifies: **The warning signs. The first actions. The safe places. The people. The professional resources. The steps for making the environment safer.**

And one more thing that may be just as important:

The future worth protecting.

The plan is not created because a crisis is inevitable. It is created because preparation is valuable. Fire drills do not mean we expect a building to burn. Emergency procedures do not mean we expect an emergency. Contingency plans do not mean we expect the primary plan to fail. They mean we understand something fundamental:

When the situation becomes difficult, preparation matters.

From Awareness to Action

Awareness by itself is not enough.

One of the warnings emerging from the Veteran Suicide Implications project was that campaigns can create enormous visibility without necessarily producing meaningful behavioral change. Awareness may increase while help-seeking, or service use, remains unchanged.

That distinction matters here. The goal of this section is not merely to encourage veterans to “be aware” of suicide.

The goal is to turn awareness into a **specific personal plan**.

Not: “Call somebody if things get bad.”

But: **Who will I call?**

Not: “Use coping strategies.”

But: **Which strategies actually work for me?**

Not: “Get professional help.”

But: **Who is my professional contact, and how do I reach them?**

Not: “Stay safe.”

But: **What specific changes will I make in my environment if I become concerned about my own safety?**

Not: “Remember that life is worth living.”

But: **What people, experiences, responsibilities, goals, memories, and possibilities make my future worth protecting?**

The next section turns those questions into an actual plan.

The Command Before the Crisis

Perhaps the most important idea in this entire project can be stated in one sentence:

Make the important decisions before the difficult moment arrives.

Decide now what your warning signs are. Decide now what actions you will take. Decide now where you can go. Decide now whom you will call. Decide now what professional resources you will use. Decide now how you will make your environment safer. And decide now what future you are protecting.

Then write it down. Share it with someone you trust. Review it. Update it. Use it.

That is not weakness. That is preparation.

And preparation has always been one of the most important commands.

What a Safety Plan Is—and Is Not

A personal safety plan is a **brief, written, step-by-step plan for what to do when distress begins to increase or thoughts of suicide appear.**

The Department of Veterans Affairs describes safety planning as a collaborative, patient-centered intervention built around six components: recognizing warning signs, using internal coping strategies, finding social distractions, contacting family or friends for help, contacting professionals or agencies, and making the environment safer. ([MIRECC](#))

One important feature deserves emphasis:

Create the plan before the crisis.

The VA specifically recommends developing the plan when the person is not in acute distress, when there is time to think clearly about warning signs, coping strategies, people, places, and resources. ([VA Mobile](#))

That is one reason safety planning fits so naturally with the *Career Commands* philosophy. Preparation is easier before conditions deteriorate. Decisions are easier before emotions intensify. Phone numbers are easier to find before you need them urgently. A difficult conversation is easier to begin when you've already considered the words. Actions that may seem obvious in a calm moment can be much harder to identify during a crisis.

A safety plan moves some of those decisions **out of the crisis and into the preparation stage.**

It Is a Plan, Not a Prediction

Creating a safety plan does not mean a person expects to become suicidal. It means the person recognizes that circumstances can change and that preparation can provide an additional layer of protection. Consider other forms of preparation.

- Organizations develop evacuation plans without expecting a fire.
- Families learn CPR without expecting a cardiac emergency.
- Pilots review emergency procedures they hope never to use.
- Military units prepare contingencies even when the primary plan appears sound.
- Preparation does not cause the emergency.

It improves the response if one occurs. The same principle applies here.

A Safety Plan Is Not...

A promise that nothing will ever go wrong.

No plan can guarantee what circumstances, emotions, or events may occur.

A test of strength or weakness.

Completing a safety plan does not mean someone lacks resilience. It means they are preparing for circumstances in which resilience may need reinforcement.

A substitute for treatment.

Safety planning is an intervention that may be used alongside professional care. VA guidance emphasizes developing individualized coping strategies and resources, often collaboratively with a health-care provider. ([Mental Health VA](#))

A generic checklist.

A strong safety plan uses the veteran's **own warning signs, own coping strategies, own people, own places, and own reasons for staying safe.**

“Call someone” is not enough.

“Call Mike at 555-____ because he knows what I mean when I say I need help” is much more useful.

Something to complete once and forget.

People change. Relationships change. Phone numbers change. Medications change. Jobs change. Stressors change.

What worked six months ago may not work today. Review and update a safety plan.

The Most Important Principle

A safety plan should be simple enough to use **when thinking is not at its best.** The VA describes it as brief, personalized, written in the veteran's own words, and easy to reference during distress. ([VA News](#))

That suggests a useful rule for everything that follows: **Specific beats complicated.**

The goal is not to create an impressive document. The goal is to create a usable one.

MY VETERAN PERSONAL SAFETY PLAN

Prepare Before the Difficult Moment Arrives

Name: _____

Date created: _____

Last reviewed: _____

Person I created/reviewed this plan with:

My Commitment to Preparation

This plan contains decisions I am making while I can think clearly.

If I begin recognizing my warning signs, I will use this plan rather than relying only on what I feel like doing in that moment.

I do not have to complete every step perfectly.

I only have to take the **next safe step**.

1. RECOGNIZE THE WARNING SIGNS

Use Self-Awareness Before the Crisis Escalates

The first step is recognizing when it is time to use the plan.

VA guidance emphasizes identifying both triggers and the thoughts, feelings, behaviors, or other warning signs that signal a crisis may be developing. The earlier those signs are recognized, the earlier action can begin. ([MIRECC](#))

This is where **Emotional Intelligence and self-awareness** become especially important.

Ask:

What changes in me when I am moving toward a dangerous place?

Possible examples might include:

- withdrawing from people
- sleeping much more or much less
- increased anger or irritability

- feeling hopeless
- feeling like a burden
- increased alcohol or substance use
- risky or impulsive behavior
- stopping activities that normally matter to me
- not answering calls or messages
- thinking repeatedly about death
- feeling trapped or believing nothing will improve

VA identifies changes such as hopelessness, feeling like a burden, withdrawal, sleep changes, anger, mood changes, and risky behavior among signs that can warrant attention. ([VA News](#))

But this section should contain **my signs**, not somebody else's list.

My Warning Signs

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

My Emotional Intelligence Check

When I notice one of these warning signs, I will ask:

What am I thinking?

What am I feeling?

What am I doing differently?

Am I isolating myself?

Is my judgment changing?

Do I need to move to the next step now?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ I'm not sure—which means I should probably continue the plan.

2. USE MY IMMEDIATE RESOURCES

What Can I Do on My Own Right Now?

The second step involves coping strategies that can be used without immediately contacting another person. ([MIRECC](#))

These strategies are not expected to solve every problem.

Their purpose may simply be to:

lower the intensity, create time, interrupt the cycle, and help me get to the next safe step.

Examples could include walking, exercising, breathing exercises, music, working with your hands, spending time with a pet, going outside, showering, watching something familiar, or using a coping strategy previously learned in counseling.

The important question is:

What has actually helped me before?

Three Things I Can Do Immediately

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Something physical that helps me reset:

Something that helps slow my thoughts:

Something I can do for the next 20–30 minutes:

Possible Obstacles

What might keep me from using these strategies when I need them?

What can I do now to make them easier to use?

3. CHANGE THE ENVIRONMENT

Find People or Places That Help Me Step Away From the Crisis

Sometimes coping alone is not enough.

The next step is to change the surroundings and create contact with other people—even if I am not yet ready to discuss what is happening.

VA safety planning distinguishes this from directly asking someone for help. A social distraction can simply be a person or place that helps interrupt the crisis: a coffee shop, library, gym, veterans organization, park, friend, acquaintance, or other setting where isolation decreases. ([Veteran Training](#))

Places I Can Go

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

People I Can Contact Just to Be Around Someone

Name: _____

Phone: _____

Name: _____

Phone: _____

A Place That Is Open When Other Places Are Closed

If I Feel Like Isolating...

That may be exactly when I need to **change locations**.

My first place to go will be:

4. CALL MY TEAM

Use the Strength of Connection

Military service reinforces a principle that applies well beyond military life:

You need to know who has your back.

This step is different from simply being around other people.

These are people I can tell:

“I'm having a difficult time.”

“I don't feel safe being by myself.”

or

“I need your help.”

A powerful finding in the Veteran Suicide Implications project was the potential importance of veteran peer connection. The exploration identified peer-led environments as opportunities to reduce isolation, increase belonging, and sometimes create bridges to formal professional care.

My Safety Team

Person #1

Name: _____

Relationship: _____

Phone: _____

What I can say:

Person #2

Name: _____

Relationship: _____

Phone: _____

What I can say:

Person #3

Name: _____

Relationship: _____

Phone: _____

What I can say:

Does My Team Know They Are My Team?

This is an important question.

There is a difference between thinking:

“I could probably call Sam.”

and knowing:

“Sam and I have already discussed this. He knows what I need him to do.”

I have talked with:

☐ Person #1

☐ Person #2

☐ Person #3

What I Need From Them

When I call, I may need someone to:

- ☐ Listen
 - ☐ Stay with me
 - ☐ Help me leave my current environment
 - ☐ Drive me somewhere safe
 - ☐ Help me contact a professional
 - ☐ Help secure access to something dangerous
 - ☐ Remind me to use this plan
 - ☐ Other: _____
-

5. ACTIVATE PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Know Who to Call Before You Need to Call

Sometimes the correct next action is professional assistance.

Do not wait until a crisis to locate the numbers.

My Health-Care / Mental-Health Contact

Name: _____

Organization: _____

Phone: _____

After-hours number: _____

My VA Contact

Name/Clinic: _____

Phone: _____

Other Professional Resource

Name: _____

Phone: _____

Nearest Emergency Department

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Veterans Crisis Line

Veterans, service members, National Guard and Reserve members, and those who support them can contact the **Veterans Crisis Line** by:

Call 988, then Press 1

Text 838255

VA also provides crisis support online. ([VA News](#))

My Rule

If I believe I may act on suicidal thoughts or cannot keep myself safe, I will **skip directly to professional or emergency help rather than waiting for earlier steps to work.**

6. SECURE THE ENVIRONMENT

Create Time and Distance From Dangerous Means

This step deserves particular attention in a veteran-oriented plan.

The Veteran Suicide Implications project identified firearms as playing a disproportionately large role in veteran suicide deaths and highlighted firearm safety as an important prevention consideration.

The purpose here is not political.

It is practical.

VA prevention guidance emphasizes reducing access to lethal means—including firearms and medications—during periods of increased suicide risk. ([VA News](#))

The principle is:

Create time and distance between the crisis and something that could make the crisis irreversible.

If Firearms Are Present

If I become concerned about my safety, my plan is:

The person who can help me implement that plan is:

Name: _____

Phone: _____

Medications or Other Dangerous Items

Items I need to consider:

My plan for securing them:

Transportation

If I should not drive myself, I will contact:

My Safer Environment

If I should not remain where I am, I will go to:

7. REMEMBER THE MISSION

What Future Am I Protecting?

The traditional safety-planning model contains six core steps. This seventh section adds a reflection component to this project, not a replacement for the established model.

It connects directly with the larger philosophy of *Career Commands for Veterans*.

Career planning asks: **Where am I going?**

Leadership asks: **What matters?**

Emotional Intelligence asks: **What am I experiencing, and what action should I take?**

Safety planning adds another question: **What future am I protecting?**

During severe distress, the future can become very small. Tomorrow may disappear. Possibilities may become difficult to see.

This section should therefore be completed **before** that moment.

People I Want to Be Here For

People Who Want Me Here

Things I Still Want to Experience

Something I Want to Accomplish

Something I Would Miss

Something That Has Given My Life Meaning

Something Difficult I Have Survived Before

What That Experience Taught Me

One Future Possibility I Am Not Ready to Give Up

MY NEXT SAFE ACTION

When I recognize my warning signs, I do **not** have to solve my life. I do not have to solve my career. I do not have to solve my finances. I do not have to solve every relationship. I do not have to know exactly what the future looks like.

I have only one immediate mission: **Take the next safe action.**

My first action will be:

If that is not enough, my next action will be:

The person I will contact is:

If I cannot keep myself safe, I will:

Keep the Plan Where It Can Be Used

A safety plan is useful only if I can find it during a difficult moment.

I will keep a copy:

☐ On my phone

☐ In my wallet

☐ In my vehicle

☐ At home

☐ With a spouse/partner

☐ With a trusted friend

☐ With my clinician

☐ Other: _____

VA also offers a free **Safety Plan app** that lets you create and carry the six-step plan on a mobile device and share it with people in your support network. ([VA Mobile](#))

One Final Question

Before putting this plan away:

Who else knows it exists?

Name: _____

Phone: _____

Date I discussed it with them: _____

That single conversation may be as important as anything written on these pages.

Career Command

Don't wait for the difficult moment to decide what it requires.

Recognize the signs.

Use your resources.

Change the environment.

Call your team.

Activate professional support.

Secure the environment.

Remember the future you are protecting.

And take the next safe action.

Jim Schreier is a U.S. Army Veteran who became interested in substance abuse in organizations because of his military experience. For over 50 years as an educator and organizational consultant, Jim researched and connected these issues to leadership, management, and organizational culture. He has researched and presented on gambling issues. Both of these issues pose significant risks for suicide. Another major issue for Jim has always been career issues, including resumes, interviewing, etc. His publication, **Audition Interview for Your Next Job**, connects these subjects and led to **Career Commands for Veterans**, originally a series of articles, which became a major publication in 2026. These resources are available at www.212-Careers.com

Interested individuals and organizations, particularly those dedicated to preventing veterans' suicide, are free to use all or any part of this report as long as the source is referenced.