



CENTER OF EXCELLENCE
FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION

Special Sleep Report

VISN 2 CoE Newsletter

May 2020



FROM THE DIRECTOR

We recognize Mental Health Awareness Month this May. According to the [National Institute of Mental Health](#), nearly one in five U.S. adults lives with a mental illness, including close to 2 million Veterans who receive mental health treatment with VHA each year.

Good sleep is a key promoter of emotional wellness and mental health, helping to combat stress, depression and anxiety. Sleep's wide-ranging physical benefits include maintaining immunologic health. Maintaining good sleep and improving poor sleep are important, controllable health behaviors that can potentially bolster immunity and partially mitigate the stresses and challenges of confronting the COVID-19 pandemic.

This special edition of the CoE newsletter highlights our Center's recent sleep research. A variety of resources for healthy sleep habits in the general population and Veterans are also available through VA, the [American Academy of Sleep Medicine](#) and CDC.

- Wilfred R. Pigeon, Ph.D.

The sleep-suicide connection

Among the many risk factors for suicidal thoughts and behaviors, one that consistently emerges is sleep disturbance (broadly defined) along with the specific sleep disorders of insomnia, nightmares and sleep apnea. CoE researchers [Wilfred Pigeon, Ph.D.](#) and [Todd Bishop, Ph.D.](#), co-authored a [recent article in *Psychiatric Times*](#) that discusses the importance of the sleep-suicide relationship. The connection between sleep and suicide is of particular importance given that sleep disorders are treatable, cut across patient populations and are associated with numerous medical and psychiatric conditions.

Incorporating sleep assessments and interventions into the clinical care plan of individuals with suicidal ideation has multiple advantages. Our researchers present information on: sleep disturbance screening, suicide assessment/safety planning and sleep treatment options in suicidal patients, including cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I).

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...sleep disorders have been linked to increased suicide risk and, thus, their treatment may reduce this risk.

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Sleep, suicide behaviors and the protective role of sleep medicine

Although the association between sleep disturbances and suicidal thoughts is well documented, the relationship of specific sleep disorders to suicide attempts is less well-established. The research to date has largely focused on either generalized sleep disturbance (i.e. sleep problems not rooted in a specific diagnosis) or the construct of insomnia.

A recently published CoE study conducted by [Todd Bishop, Ph.D.](#), [Patrick Walsh, MPH, Ph.D.](#), [Lisham Ashrafioun, Ph.D.](#), [Jill Lavigne, Ph.D.](#), and [Wilfred Pigeon, Ph.D.](#), addressed some of these knowledge gaps by utilizing objective markers of sleep and suicide in a large sample of over 60,000 Veterans.

CoE researchers found the presence of insomnia, sleep-related breathing disorders and nightmares were each significantly associated with increased likelihood of a suicide attempt. Importantly, sleep medicine visits were associated with a reduced risk of suicide attempt in patients diagnosed with a sleep disorder.

Post-doctoral fellow awarded 2020 SRSF YIRF scholarship

CoE post-doctoral fellow [Katrina Speed, Ph.D.](#), is one of five [American Academy of Sleep Medicine's \(AASM\) 2020 Young Investigators Research Forum \(YIRF\)](#) scholarship recipients. Selected attendees receive scholarship funds to attend a professional development research forum. Scholarship recipients are selected based on "past research productivity and future promise in sleep medicine research." Congratulations to Dr. Speed!



Dr. Bishop receives sleep grant award from the Hypersomnia Foundation

[The Hypersomnia Foundation](#), a nonprofit organization to "advocate, educate, and provide resources for research on behalf of people affected by idiopathic hypersomnia (IH) and related sleep disorders," recently awarded a grant to CoE researcher [Todd Bishop, Ph.D.](#) during National Sleep Awareness Month.

HF's Research Award Program offers funding to support the study of non-cataplectic hypersomnias (i.e. IH, NT2 and KLS). Toward that end, Dr. Bishop's award will fund his work developing and validating a case ascertainment algorithm to identify idiopathic hypersomnia within the electronic medical record of the Veterans Health Administration.

Additional aims of the study are to: 1) estimate the prevalence of IH diagnosis among the Veteran population, 2) facilitate an examination of treatment utilization patterns and prescribing practices and 3) explore co-occurring physical and behavioral health conditions with an emphasis on suicide risk factors.

Congratulations to Dr. Bishop!