Strategic Program Management Office
Veterans Benefits Administration

VBA VSignals Service Recovery Program: Conducting Service Recovery Calls

Duration: 30 minutes

Audience:

This lesson is intended for Service Recovery Practitioners (SRPs).

Purpose

The purpose of this training is to equip SRPs with the essential skills and knowledge necessary for conducting effective service recovery (SR) calls utilizing the VA's SALUTE model. Additionally, SRPs will learn how to skillfully ask follow-up questions to pinpoint root causes, de-escalate challenging interactions, and identify individuals in crisis while facilitating their transfer to appropriate resources for support.

Objective

Upon completing this lesson, participants will be able to:

- Understand and apply the VA's SALUTE model effectively during SR calls.
- Ask relevant follow-up questions during SR calls to survey respondents.
- Skillfully transfer individuals in crisis to the appropriate resource.

Preparation for the Call

In preparation for SR calls, the SRP is encouraged to:

- Have the call list available or log into the VSignals platform.
- Identify how the conversation will be documented. If the SRP chooses to handwrite the survey respondent's feedback, the information must be entered into the call list or VSignals platform when the call is complete.
- Review the survey respondent's file or history in the appropriate case management system. Attempt to obtain as much information about the survey respondent's experience with the business line (BL) or program office (PO) service/benefit process as it relates to the survey.
- Review the survey respondent's address to identify the time zone and call accordingly.
- Prepare a plan that gives a mental outline of how to handle different reactions.
- Learn how to do conference/three-way calls from your telephone system. Employees making VSignals SR calls are required to use a Softphone.
- Identify a buddy or partner at the start of your shift, or prior to making calls, and ask that person to be on stand-by, should crisis situations arise.
- Have job aids handy:
    - Crisis Call Management Desktop Guide
    - Crisis Call -Warm Handover Procedure
    - Crisis Call Management Tip Sheet
    - De-Escalate Challenging Interactions handout
    - Time Zones Job Aid
    - Call Script

Call Techniques

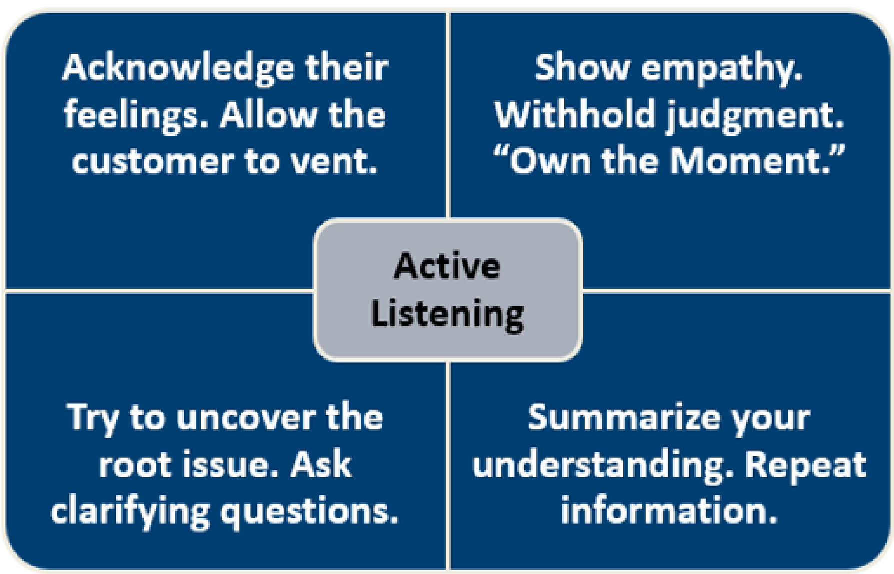
To help the survey respondent feel heard, use active listening. Active listening is the practice of paying full attention to and absorbing what someone is saying so that mutual understanding can occur or be improved. Active listening is an important first step to defuse a situation and seek solutions to problems. Active listening involves listening to their words, the tone of their voice, and unspoken emotional queues that give insight into how they feel.

Through active listening, acknowledge the survey respondent's feelings and allow them to vent. Show empathy, withhold judgment, and "Own the Moment."

While talking to the survey respondent, attempt to uncover the root issue by asking clarifying questions and summarizing your understanding of what you heard. Repeating the information is a good way to let the survey respondent know you are listening. When documenting their feedback, be sure to capture any direct quotes.

Call Techniques

- Use a friendly tone of voice to identify yourself and the purpose of the call.
- After your introduction, ask permission before proceeding. If the survey respondent declines to participate, thank them for participating in the VSignals survey, and end the call.
- For example, "I understand. Thank you for your time and thank you for your service," as appropriate.

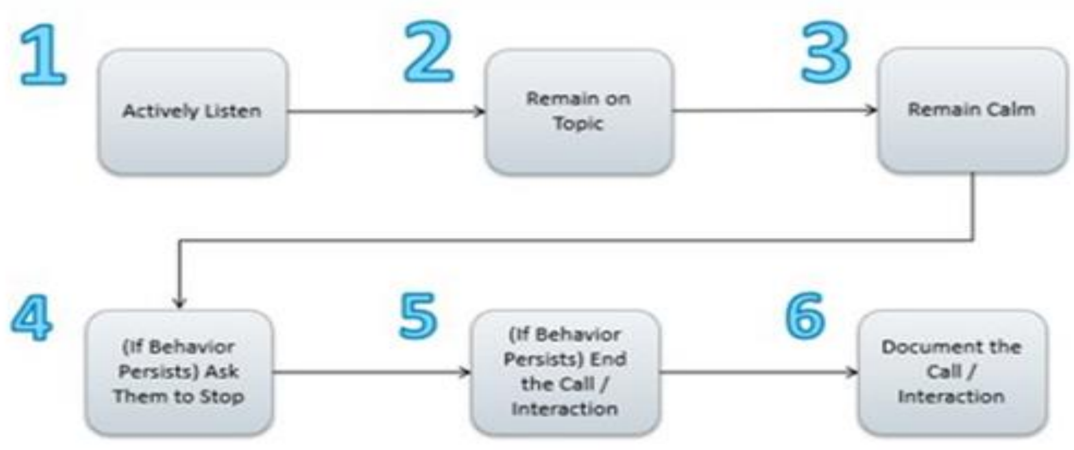


Call Tips

When faced with disruptive behaviors, maintaining **WECARE** can be challenging, but it is essential to engendering civility. The steps below provide guidance on how to consistently practice WECARE in telephone interactions while also protecting your well-being.

- **Welcome** the Veteran and his/her family warmly.
- **Explain** who you are, what your role is, and what he/she can expect from you.
- **Connect** by having a pleasant interaction and learning more about the Veteran.
- **Actively listen** to the Veteran's needs and preferences. Be open to what he/she is saying without interruption. Take the Veteran's needs into account.
- **Respond** to his/her needs and explain what you are planning to do. Describe your actions and follow up to make sure the Veteran is okay.
- **Express gratitude** and thank him/her for choosing VA or compliment him/her on something he/she did well.

Step-by-Step Process for Handling Disruptive Calls



Step 1 – **Actively listen**. Allow the survey respondent to vent but be sure to avoid a power struggle. Acknowledge their feelings and show empathy. Attempt to uncover the real issue he/she is upset about by asking clarifying questions, summarizing your understanding of the issue with them, and withholding judgment to further foster trust and cooperation. While doing so, use “Own the Moment” principles to connect with the caller.

Example dialogue:

- *“What I hear you saying is ____.”*
- *“It sounds like what you are experiencing is ____.”*
- *“I’m sorry to hear that this was your experience.”*

Step 2 – Remain on topic. Redirect the survey respondent by offering to assist with relevant issues and avoid discussing any personal topics that may further agitate the customer. Be compassionate and restate his/her concerns to gain clarity and show understanding. Take control of the conversation and continually strive to get to the root of the issue at hand and focus to help solve the problem. The tone of voice is important to genuinely convey that you are there to help.

Example dialogue:

- *“I would really like to help. Can you help me better understand the situation or your concern?”*
- *“I can see that you are frustrated. I would really like to address your concern. Can you tell me more about it?”*
- *“Well, it sounds like there is a lot going on here. Let me see what I can do for you today with this part.”*

Step 3 – Remain Calm. Inform the survey respondent that you understand that they are frustrated and that you empathize with their situation and in the spirit of mutual cooperation you are happy to help with their issue by focusing on discussing the matter.

Example dialogue:

- *“I would like to continue talking about your concerns. Let us discuss this matter together.”*
- *“I know that you have probably been working on this for a while, but I would really like to get this resolved for you let us figure this out together.”*

Step 4 – Ask the caller to stop. If the survey respondent's behavior persists, ask them to stop using argumentative, abusive, or obscene language. The goal is to attempt to bring the call back to a constructive place. Set boundaries by asking them to change their behavior to one that is more constructive for the conversation. Be specific about the behavior needed to move forward. When doing so, it is helpful to acknowledge the feelings that are fueling the behavior first, so their situation and experience are acknowledged, rather than feeling that very valid feelings are being dismissed.

Example dialogue:

- *"It sounds like this has been very frustrating for you. It is difficult for me to follow what you are saying when you are yelling. If you can lower your voice, I will be able to better understand your concerns and assist you."*
- *"I understand that you are angry, but if you could lower your voice/use milder language, I think we could be a lot more productive."*

Step 5 – End the call. If you have exhausted all means to de-escalate and the survey respondent continues their behavior, expressly tell them you are going to disconnect the call. Describe their behavior (e.g. name calling) and the consequence (I will have to disconnect) to them with compassion and provide an opportunity for them to reach out when they can interact in a more civil manner. Sometimes the survey respondent may not be able to de-escalate in that moment, but if given a bit of space, they can regroup and have a more productive conversation.

Example dialogue (prior to disconnecting):

- *"If you can't lower your voice/stop calling me names, I am going to have to disconnect. We can talk again when you are less angry."*

Step 6 – Document and report the incident. To properly report the incident, document and report the details to your Chief or SR Lead. Documentation should focus on the facts of the call rather than your emotions.

Example Reporting:

- *"I asked the survey respondent to stop twice, and the language continued. I disconnected the call after the second time and let them know that when they are ready, I would be happy to help figure out their case."*

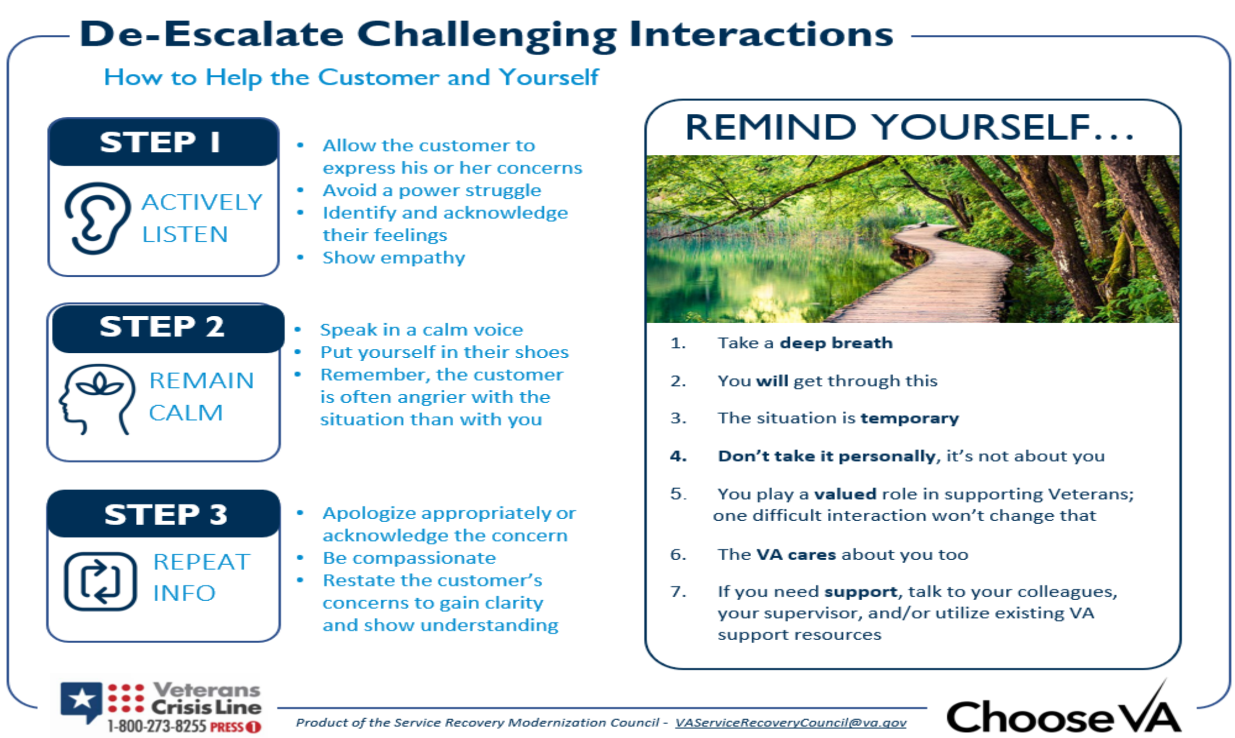
*Additional dialogue tips are available for your review in the Engendering Civility SOP.

De-escalation Challenges

Our customers are sometimes dealing with challenging situations. So, we want to be compassionate, remain calm, listen, assist them, and keep them on track as much as possible. We want to de-escalate challenging interactions, by reminding ourselves to:

- Take a deep breath.
- Remain calm as we actively listen, and
- Do not take it personally.

There are several resources in the Toolkit within the VVSR Program Community of Practice SharePoint site regarding challenging interactions such as crisis management and difficult conversations. There are also two optional TMS courses, entitled Own the Moment ***TMS VA 42980*** and VA Customer Service: Angry Caller ***TMS VA 12966***, which may be taken at your leisure.



Follow-up Questions

Follow-up questions help us identify additional information that might be overlooked or has not been understood. Asking the correct clarifying questions and root-cause analysis questions can help VBA provide a better customer experience.

Clarifying questions are questions the listener asks the speaker, in an effort to eliminate or prevent any misunderstanding, confusion, or ambiguity.

Example dialogue:

- *"Did I hear you say that you had an issue with your claims?"*
- *"Did I hear you correctly when you said that ………"*
- *"What did you mean by you expected the caller to talk to you in a different way? What did you experience?"*

Root cause analysis questions assist with finding a solution to a problem and the reason why it occurs.

The "Five Whys" is a common technique used in root cause analysis that involves asking "Why?" five times. By the fifth "Why?", you have most likely discovered the root cause of the problem.

Example: You are late for work, and you are in a hurry to get to work. In the process of rushing, you run a red light.

- Someone could ask you, "*Why did you run a red light?*"
- Your answer would be "*Because I was late for work*."
- Questioning further, "*Why were you late for work?*"
- Answer "*Because I woke up late.*"
- Digging further, "*Why did you wake up late?*"
- "*Because my alarm did not work.*"
- "*Why did your alarm not work?*"
- "*Because my phone battery is dead*."
- "*Why was your phone battery dead?*"
- "*Well, it's my cell phone, and I forgot to charge it.*"

By getting to the root cause of the situation, we are also obtaining information on possible ways of mitigation.

Call Script

In VA, the SALUTE model is used for SR. The call scripts also follow this model in our interaction with Veterans.

The VA Way SALUTE

Acknowledging errors and making them right to honor Veterans, their families, and other customers to make sure their needs are met.

SALUTE	What We Say	What We Do
S – **SAY HELLO,** make eye contact (or smile if on the phone), introduce yourself, and explain your role.	*Good ___________, my name is __________, and I'm calling from the Department of Veterans Affairs [**Insert business line**]. May I speak to ________________?*	Be polite, warm, and friendly. Speak clear, concise and slow so the customer can easily understand you.
A – **APOLOGIZE** and show empathy for the issue or concern expressed by your customer.	*Thank you for completing an online survey regarding your experience [**Survey for Call**]. We have received your feedback. I wanted to apologize if we did not meet your expectations and learn more about your experience. Do you have a few minutes to speak with me?*	Learn to apologize for the respondent's experience, whether you think it is real or perceived. The customer thinks it's real.
L – **LISTEN** to the concerns that are being raised without interruption. Be open to what your customer is saying.	*What I would like to do today is ask follow-up questions where you indicated by your surveys score(s) that you did not have a positive experience. This will help us understand how VA can improve the process in those specific areas. Can you tell me more about what happened?"*	Show empathy with no judgement. Acknowledge the customer's feelings. Allow the customer to vent. Try to uncover the root issue.
U – **UNDERSTAND** what your customer needs by asking questions.	*I can imagine how frustrating that must have been. To better understand what you are saying, I want to go over what I gathered from you [**summarize a key point that they want addressed**] to ensure everything we've discussed is accurate. Anything else I should add?*	Ask clarifying questions, summarize your understanding and repeat information.
T – **TAKE ACTION** to resolve the issue and tell your customer what you are planning to do. After you take action, follow up with your customer.	*I want to assure you that the feedback you and I discussed today will be analyzed to obtain insights into your experience. If necessary, we will look at the process to see how we can make the experience better for other Veterans.*	Use your best judgment on what would meet or exceed the Veteran's needs and expectations. Don't assume the Veteran understands VA systems and processes.
E – **EXPRESS GRATITUDE** for letting you know about the situation. Restate your apology and ask if there is anything else you can do to put them at ease.	*I appreciate you sharing this information with me. Thank you for bringing this to my attention and again my apologies. "Do you have any questions regarding what we've talked about today or anything else I can do for you? Thank you for your time and thank you for your service. Our goal is to provide you with exceptional care and customer service, and we value your insight. Have a great day!*	Make it easy for the Veteran by outlining the process and providing contact information or any forms they may need. "Own the Moment."

The call script is a guide to assist you with getting familiar with making SR calls. As the call script takes you through what you should say during a call, we suggest that it not be read word for word but utilized to guide your conversation. It is recommended to go by the script for the first few weeks until you are fully aware of the content. As you become more acquainted with the information, the expectation is for you to eventually make it your own.

The script portion shown below walks through introductions and why you are calling.

Introduction

Caller:

Good ***[Time of the Day],*** my name is ***[Caller's Name]***, and I'm calling from the Department of Veterans Affairs ***[Insert Line of Business]***. May I speak to ***[Veteran's/Respondent's Name]***?

I am calling because you recently completed an online survey regarding your experience with VBA's ***[Line of Business Survey]***. Because your Likert scores did not convey an exceptional CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE, I wanted to apologize if we did not meet your expectations and learn more about your experience.

Do you have a few minutes to speak with me?

If Veteran/respondent declines: I understand. Thank you for your time and thank you for your service.

If Veteran/respondent agrees: Read **Context**

Context

That's great. Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey. It provides us with feedback on customer's experience with ***[Line of Business Survey]*** and helps us determine how the process is working for Veterans. The feedback I'm gathering from you today is reported to VBA's Executive Leadership and is analyzed to obtain insights into your experience, which drives process improvements to make the CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE better for other Veterans.

Before we proceed further, I need to read the following statement to you: During our call, I only have your individual survey responses in front of me. I do not have your ***[claim/benefit information, subsequent decisions, i.e., what the Line of Business survey is measuring]***.

I am not going to ask you for any personal information, such as your Social Security Number, date of birth, or branch of service.

Important**:** When providing SR calls, some business lines, like Comp Service, need to state upfront to the Veteran, that the call or anything discussed during the call will not be used for the purpose of calculating their benefits or be part of the claims record.

Shown below is the portion of the call script that provides this information.

"Also, we will not use anything we discuss today for the purpose of ***[calculating your benefits, nor will this information be part of your claims record, i.e., what is specific to the BL/PO]****. The only focus will be on the survey responses themselves. What I would like to do today is ask follow-up questions where you indicated by your survey score(s) that you did not have a positive experience. This will help us understand how VA can improve the process in those specific areas."*

"To help jog your memory, I will read the survey question to you first, and then read the score you provided."

"The first survey question I would like to ask you about is:"

After introductions, move to the call list or VSignals platform.

Call list:

As illustrated below, the call list is designed to include the survey question at the top and the follow-up questions below. The low Likert response will be on the left and the high Likert response will be on the right.

1. When VA called me or met with me for an informal conference to discuss my claim, the VA decision maker that conducted my informal conference was helpful.		
Score	1a. Likerts 1,2,3: Please tell us why the decision-maker was not helpful.	1b. Likerts 4,5: Please tell us why the decision-maker was helpful.
2. VA's notification letter clearly explained the reasons and bases for my Higher-Level Review decision.		
Score	2a. Likerts 1,2,3: What can VA do to make our notification letters on Higher-Level Review decisions better or easier to read?	2b. Likerts 4,5: What, if any, improvements would you make to the VA notification letter?
3. I trust VA to fulfill our country's commitment to Veterans.		
Score	3a. Likerts 1,2,3: How can VA better demonstrate its promise to care for Veterans?	3b. Likerts 4,5: How did VA demonstrate its promise to care for Veterans?

VSignals platform:

When making calls to survey respondents who provided a Low Likert score, only the low Likert follow-up questions will be provided. When providing calls to high Likert survey respondents, only high Likert follow-up questions will be provided. The in-survey question provided to the survey respondent is located below each follow-up question.

Please complete additional follow-up Service Recovery Questions.

What made the medical exam process difficult for you?

In-Survey Question: I believe the compensation medical exam process (e.g., scheduling, notice, travel) was easy.

How can VA improve the online platform and/or letters to provide more useful updates?

In-Survey Question: The online platform and/or letters gave me useful status updates throughout the disability compensation claims process.

Optional Question: Have the status updates been consistent from various sources (i.e. online, letters, VA reps)?

In-Survey Question: The online platform and/or letters gave me useful status updates throughout the disability compensation claims process.

What would be a reasonable amount of time to decide a claim? What is your understanding of VA's timeliness goal to complete disability claims?

Answering VBA Benefit Questions

During a SR call, if a survey respondent asks about a VBA benefit, offer them:

- 1-800-827-1000 (VA toll-free number).
- VA.gov link to the benefit in question.
- Veterans Engagement Reporting Application: VERA - Home (site.com) VERA provides Veterans the ability to schedule a virtual or an in-person appointment.

The best practice is to send a follow-up email to the survey respondent with the information above from your VSignals mailbox.

Concluding SR Calls

When concluding the call, avoid letting the conversation drag out:

- Look for signs of a natural ending where the message has been delivered and received.
- Clarify the next steps and actions that each of you can agree to take.
- Look for ways to end on a positive note.
- Offer the person the chance to add anything that may have been missed.

Shown below is a sample dialogue from the call list for ending a call.

*"**[Veteran's/Survey Respondent's Name]**, thank you for your time and feedback. Our goal was to understand your experience in **[topic you discussed; one example may be the modernized decision review process]**.*

Your thoughts, ideas, and suggestions play a major role in helping us identify opportunities to improve.

*Do you have any questions regarding what we've talked about today? **[Provide BL/PO specific guidance, the national call center 1-800-827-1000, and information about VERA - Home (site.com)]**.*

Thank you for your time and thank you for your service."

Post Feedback - Thank You Note

Each BL/PO is responsible for establishing a dedicated VSignals mailbox before conducting SR activities for the first time. The VSignals mailbox must remain active for the BL/PO survey(s) lifespan. It is important you obtain access and use this mailbox instead of your personal *VA.gov* mailbox. This is the mailbox you will use for all email correspondence to survey respondents, such as thank you emails, after completing SR calls.

Below is an example of a thank-you note for survey respondents after a SR call.

Dear Mr./Ms. ______________,
*Thank you for participating in the feedback session on your recent VSignals survey responses. We appreciate your willingness to speak with us regarding the **[BL/PO Survey/Process]**. Hearing about your personal experience was informative and helps us understand the customer's experience with the **[BL/PO Office Survey/Process]**. Our goal is to improve the process so that it exceeds your expectations and those of all Veterans.*

Respectfully,
[BL/PO]

Important: A 'Post Feedback Session Thank You Note' is not sent after a crisis or serious incident call.

Handling a Crisis During a Call

1. **Acknowledge the survey respondent's feelings and obtain/confirm their information.** Ask for their current location ("Where are you right now?") if not already confirmed at the start of the call and confirm their telephone number. *Note*: The address in the eFolder and the Veteran's current location can be different.

2. **Evaluate the crisis to determine the individual's risk level.** Ask the individual, "Are you thinking of suicide?" or "Are you having suicidal thoughts?"

Determine if the survey respondent is safe before attempting a warm transfer to the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL). ***Never transfer a survey respondent who is in an unsafe situation or that you have assessed as high risk.***

*For more information on this topic, please review Interactions with Suicidal Individuals.

Low-risk and/or survey respondents are safe:
If the survey respondent is determined to be safe:

- Offer resources to assist with the identified crisis.
- Offer to transfer the caller to the VCL advising them you will stay on the call until they are connected with someone; complete the action using the warm transfer number: 833-825-2273.
- Provide the caller with the VCL telephone number:
  - 1-800-273-8255, Press 1 or

  988, Press 1.
- Attempt to transfer the call to the VCL using the warm transfer number: 833-825-2273

When transferring the call to the VCL, use the following script:
"This is (SPR's name) with the VBA Service Recovery Team. I have (name of survey respondent) on the line. Their callback number is XXX-XXX-XXXX. "

High-risk and/or survey respondents are unsafe:
If the survey respondent is unwilling to be transferred or you feel it is unsafe to place them on hold or is high risk, then:

- Do as the survey respondent wants.
- Remain on the telephone.
- Do NOT transfer or place them on hold.
- Verify the individual's status.
  - Is anyone else there with them?
  - Are they currently receiving medical treatment?
  - What are the name(s) and phone numbers of family, friends, or a significant other?

3. **Signal a coworker** (buddy) in person or electronically in Microsoft Teams that you are engaged in a crisis call. Attempt to provide information about the survey respondent and the conversation, such as name, address, telephone number, and situation (i.e., suicidal ideation, immediate threat). Ask the coworker to alert management and to assist you in response measures that you have not taken yet, such as calling the Veteran's Crisis Line or 911.

4. **Engage the survey respondent.** Continue talking calmly with the survey respondent and acknowledge their feelings while contacting the Crisis Line. Do **not** hang up the call. Let them know you are sending help or that you are helping them connect with the Crisis Line and that you will stay on the phone with them. Try to engage them in a discussion around any positives that they may identify. Reassure them that help is available and acknowledge their feelings.

5. **Transfer to the Crisis Line.** Stay on the phone until help arrives from first responders, or until you successfully transfer them to the Crisis Line. Do a warm transfer (conference/three-way call) to the Crisis Line by dialing (800) 273-8255 or 988 and pressing 1 for the Veterans Crisis Line. Provide the Crisis Line with the survey respondent's contact information (current address, location, and telephone number) and a brief context of the situation explaining why you are transferring the call. ***Important***: Do not leave the survey respondent on hold for too long while introducing the call to the Crisis Line responder.

6. **Notification.** Immediately inform BL/PO leadership, send an email to the SPMO VVSR mailbox with the following information below, and update the crisis tab on the Excel call list spreadsheet.

Information to include in your notification to SPMO:

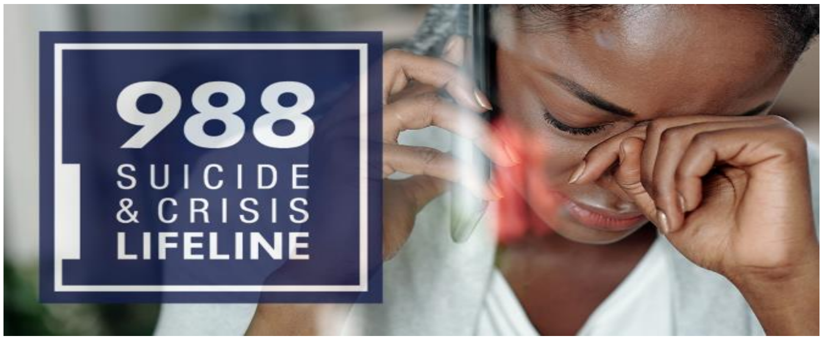
- a. Date of crisis and type
- b. Date of warm hand-off
- c. Notes (use info from the call list note section)

Employee Assistance Program

We want to be sure that while we are taking care of our Veterans, we are also taking care of our employees. Some SR calls can be challenging or may bring up personal feelings. Perhaps you had a similar experience as someone in a crisis or you have a loved one who walked through a crisis.

We want to ensure all employees are aware of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and other resources. Should you find yourself in a crisis or struggling after a difficult call, we want to remind you that 988 is not only for our Veterans but for everyone.

- **Any employee can call or text 988 to connect** with mental health professionals via the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.
- **If you are a Veteran, you can press “1” after dialing 988** to connect directly to the Veterans Crisis Lifeline.
- **Veterans** can also **text 838255 to reach** the Veterans Crisis Lifeline.



Each of us has a different threshold. So, if you feel that you need assistance you can speak to your supervisor, and you can reach out to EAP.

EAP is a voluntary, work-based program that offers free and confidential assessments, short-term counseling, referrals, and follow-up services to employees who have personal and/or work-related problems.

Federal Occupational Health

- Review the wide range of available Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services and benefits.
- Explore a host of health and wellness articles, newsletters, and videos
- Watch on-demand webinars and register for upcoming live sessions
- Access helpful assessments and tools
- To meet your unique needs, find a provider here

EAP Overview

Additional Employee Resource:

How To Get Mental Health Help | MentalHealth.gov

Challenging conversations are not common, but they do occur. Please note that calls with individuals who are potentially suicidal can also be stressful for the employee. As a reminder, you should notify your Chief or SR Lead immediately when one occurs. The

SR lead is responsible for offering the SRP an EAP referral. As a best practice, the SR lead should offer temporary relief from SR duties, when possible.

Things to Remember

- Service recovery calls should begin the first day of the work week.
- Do not call Veterans before 9 a.m. or after 5 p.m. their time.
    - As we will be calling to speak with individuals in different time zones, we recommend you have the time zone job aid in front of you before making calls.
    - One exception to the specified call hours is if a survey respondent asks you to call them back outside of the approved hours and the requested time is within your tour of duty.
    - If an error is found during call preparation, proceed to the 'Apologize, Take Action, Follow Up' section of the call script.
- If no answer, leave a voicemail or send an email.
    - A best practice is to leave a voicemail if there is no answer. Caller ID is based on the cellular carrier, and your call may not show up as the VA.
    - There is a greater response rate if you leave a message and indicate that you will call the next business day and provide an approximate time (for example, before 11, after 2, between 11 and 1.) They are now expecting your call and are more likely to answer.

Summary of BL/PO Specific Topics

In the VVSR program, there are some items that are BL/PO specific, and you should reach out to your SR Lead. These items include:

- Location of BL/PO VSignals mailbox. Remember this is the mailbox for sending thank you emails after completing SR calls.
- Problems or missing information on the call list.
- How SR calls are assigned.

- How many questions should be asked during each call, and if there are any specific questions that should be asked?
  - Best practice: ask at least 2-3 questions, so your BL/PO has enough feedback to identify potential process improvements.
- BL/PO specific procedures when a Veteran shares a current issue that should be reviewed and possibly corrected.
- BL/PO specific procedures in the event you encounter a Veteran in a crisis.
  - The current VVSR program procedure is to complete a warm handover if the Veteran is interested, update all the columns on the crisis tab of the call list, and notify both your BL/PO lead and SPMO.
- Keep the Crisis Call Management Desktop Guide, readily available should you identify a crisis during your SR call.