

My name is Shonta Thomas, and I'm a 10-year U.S. Navy Veteran and a Veterans Crisis Line Responder. Serving Veterans matters deeply to me because I understand that there is a person, a family, and a story behind every call. I want the people who reach out to know that their lives matter and that someone is willing to listen during some of their hardest moments.

However, this work has come with a serious emotional and mental cost. In addition to supporting people experiencing suicidal thoughts, emotional distress, and other crises, I have endured racist comments, sexual harassment, hateful language, and threats from both civilian and Veteran callers.

I have received calls involving inappropriate sexual comments and callers masturbating while on the phone with me. I have been told to die, told to kill myself, and threatened by callers saying they would kill me. These words are directed at me while I am trying to offer help and support. Being on the receiving end of this abuse is disturbing, degrading, and emotionally exhausting.

As a Veteran myself, being told to kill myself while working to help other people stay alive is especially painful. My commitment to serving Veterans does not erase my own humanity or my need to feel safe. I can care about someone's distress and still be harmed by their behavior toward me.

The cumulative impact of these interactions has contributed to mental burnout. It is difficult to absorb racist abuse, sexual harassment, or threats and then move into another crisis conversation that requires patience, compassion, and focused attention. The previous interaction does not simply disappear when the call ends. There is an emotional weight that comes with repeatedly being targeted while also carrying the responsibility of helping someone through a crisis.

For me, burnout means feeling mentally and emotionally depleted by work that I still care deeply about. It means having to find the energy to continue showing up with compassion after my own dignity and safety have been attacked. Caring about this mission does not make me immune to the harm I experience while doing it. I want greater protections and meaningful support for Veterans Crisis Line Responders. That includes clear procedures for addressing abusive and sexually inappropriate calls, access to support after disturbing interactions, and adequate opportunities to decompress and recover. Responders need to know that threats and harassment will be taken seriously and that protecting our well-being is part of sustaining this service.

I am sharing my experience because the people answering these calls need care and protection, too. I want to continue helping Veterans, but that commitment must be supported by working conditions that recognize the emotional cost of this work. My mental health, dignity, and safety matter alongside the lives I work to protect.

Shonta Thomas