



Identifying Patients at Risk of Suicide

Know the signs

Over a third (38%) of the people who attempt suicide saw a health care provider in the week prior to their attempt. Rarely will patients voluntarily say that they are thinking of ending their lives.

The following three behaviors may indicate a person is at immediate risk for suicide:

- Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself
- Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as seeking available pills
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live

Other behaviors may indicate a person is at serious risk—especially if the behavior is new, has increased, and/or seems related to a painful experience or major change.

- Talking of feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings

Risk Factors

There are many factors that increase risk for suicide. Whereas warning signs are current and observable behaviors, risk factors are underlying circumstances or conditions in an individual.

Individual Risk Factors

- Previous suicide attempt
- Impulsive and/or aggressive tendencies
- Major physical illnesses, especially with chronic pain
- Mental disorders, particularly: Mood disorders, schizophrenia, anxiety disorders (e.g., posttraumatic stress disorder [PTSD]), and certain alcohol and other substance use disorders
- Personality disorders (PD); (e.g., borderline PD, antisocial PD, and obsessive-compulsive PD)
- In youths: attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and conduct disorders (e.g., antisocial behavior, aggression, impulsivity)
- Psychiatric symptoms and states of mind: severe anxiety or panic, insomnia, command hallucinations, intoxication, self-hate, and anhedonia
- History of trauma or abuse
- Family history of suicide

Social/Environmental Risk Factors

- Lack of social support and increasing isolation
- Easy access to/familiarity with lethal means (e.g., guns, illicit drugs, medications)
- Chaotic family history (e.g., separation or divorce, change in caretaker, change in living situation, incarcerations)
- Local clusters of suicide that have a contagious influence
- Legal difficulties, contact with law enforcement, and/or incarceration
- Barriers to accessing health care, especially mental health and substance abuse treatment

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