

Warning Signs, Risk and Protective Factors for Suicide

The following information has been adapted from American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). For more information see AFSP at <https://afsp.org/risk-factors-and-warning-signs> and CDC for information on protective factors <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/riskprotectivefactors.html>

What Leads to Suicide?

There's no single cause for suicide. Suicide most often occurs when stressors and health issues converge to create an experience of hopelessness and despair. Depression is the most common condition associated with suicide, and it is often undiagnosed or untreated. Conditions like depression, anxiety, and substance problems, especially when unaddressed, increase risk for suicide. Yet it's important to

note that most people who actively manage their mental health conditions go on to engage in life.

What to do when someone is suicidal –

- Start by asking, be sensitive but ask direct questions. Asking about suicidal thoughts or feelings won't push someone into doing something self-destructive. Talking about feelings may reduce the risk of acting on suicidal feelings.
- Look for warning signs such as talking about suicide, withdrawing from social contact, mood swings and increase use of alcohol or drugs.
- For immediate help, call 911. Don't try to handle the situation alone, get help from a professional. Encourage the person to call a suicide hotline to speak to a trained counselor.

-Mayo Clinic

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/suicide/in-depth/suicide/art-20044707>

Suicide Risk Factors are characteristics or conditions that increase the chance a person may try to take their life.

Risk Factor – Health

- Mental Health Conditions
 - Depression
 - Substance use problems
 - Bipolar disorder
 - Schizophrenia
 - Personality traits of aggression, mood changes and poor relationships
 - Conduct disorder
 - Anxiety disorders
- Serious Physical Health Conditions Including Pain
 - Traumatic Brain Injury

Risk Factor – Environmental

- Access to lethal means including firearms and drugs
- Prolonged stress, such as harassment, bullying, relationship problems or unemployment
- Stressful life events, like rejection, divorce, financial crisis, other life transitions or loss
- Exposure to another person's suicide, or to graphic or sensationalized accounts of suicide

Risk Factor – Historical

- Previous suicide attempts
- Family history of suicide
- Childhood abuse, neglect or trauma

Suicide Warning Signs are things to look out for when concerned a person may be suicidal. A change in behavior or the presence of entirely new behaviors is of sharpest concern particularly if the new or changed behavior is related to a painful event, loss, or change. Most people who take their lives exhibit one or more warning signs, either through what they say or what they do.

Warning Sign – Talk

If a person talks about:

- Killing themselves
- Feeling hopeless
- Having no reason to live
- Being a burden to others
- Feeling trapped
- Unbearable pain

Warning Sign – Behavior

Behaviors that may signal risk, especially if related to a painful event, loss or change:

- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Looking for a way to end their lives, such as searching online for methods
- Withdrawing from activities
- Isolating from family and friends
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Visiting or calling people to say goodbye
- Giving away prized possessions
- Aggression
- Fatigue

Warning Signs – Mood

People who are considering suicide often display one or more of the following moods:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Loss of interest
- Irritability
- Humiliation/Shame
- Agitation/Anger
- Relief/Sudden Improvement

Protective Factors for Suicide

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) provides information on risk and protective factors, for articles and publications <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/riskprotectivefactors.html> The CDC is the source for the following:

Protective factors buffer individuals from suicidal thoughts and behavior. To date, protective factors have not been studied as extensively or rigorously as risk factors. Identifying and understanding protective factors are, however, equally as important as researching risk factors.

Protective Factors

- Effective clinical care for mental, physical, and substance abuse disorders

- Easy access to a variety of clinical interventions and support for help seeking
- Family and community support (connectedness)
- Support from ongoing medical and mental health care relationships
- Skills in problem solving, conflict resolution, and nonviolent ways of handling disputes
- Cultural and religious beliefs that discourage suicide and support instincts for self-preservation