



Risk Factors, Warning Signs and Protective Factors

Risk Factors

According to the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, “risk factors may be thought of as leading to or being associated with suicide”; that is, people ‘possessing’ the risk factor are at greater potential for thoughts of suicide behavior.

Biopsychosocial Risk Factors

- Mental disorders, particularly mood disorders, schizophrenia, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, and certain personality disorders
- Alcohol and other substance use disorders
- Hopelessness
- Impulsive and/or aggressive tendencies
- History of trauma or abuse
- Some major physical illnesses
- Previous suicide attempt
- Family history of suicide

Environmental Risk Factors

- Job or financial loss
- Relational or social loss
- Easy access to lethal means
- Local clusters of suicide that have a contagious influence

Social-cultural Risk Factors

- Lack of social support and sense of isolation
- Stigma associated with help-seeking behavior
- Talking about suicide, death, or preoccupation with dying. The individual might say, “I wish I were dead” or “People would be better off if I am not around” or “Soon you won’t have to worry about me” or “I just can’t take it anymore. I am done.”
- Has a suicidal plan and the means to carry it through (note: many attempts, especially in youth are impulsive. Thus, absence of a plan is not evidence of absence of risk)
- Trouble eating or sleeping (sleeping all the time, unable to sleep at all, not able to eat or is overeating)
- Intensity of distress and agitation accompanied by depression
- Significant changes in behavior and/or personality
- Loss of interest in activities, work, school, hobbies, or social interactions

Warning Signs

People who are in danger of taking their own lives may try to reach out to others—sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. Rarely will at-risk individuals immediately volunteer the information that they are thinking of harming themselves. Instead, it is important to look for some of the following warning signs.

- Deteriorating physical appearance
- Giving away prized possessions and saying goodbye
- Increased drug and/or alcohol use
- Statements about hopelessness, or worthlessness or feeling like a burden to others
- Taking unnecessary risks
- Sudden happiness or calmness following a depressed mood
- Obsession with suicidal means (guns, knives, hanging materials)
- Problems in school or work performance
- Chronic pain or frequent complaints of physical symptoms
- An inability to concentrate, trouble remembering things
- Try to access means: stockpiling medications or buying a gun
- Taking a sudden interest or losing interest in religion
- Getting one's affairs in order - paying off debt, getting a will, getting life insurance
- Scheduling medical appointments for vague symptoms

Protective Factors

Protective factors can reduce the likelihood of suicide, enhance resilience, and may serve to counterbalance risk factors.

- Effective clinical care for mental, physical and substance abuse disorders
- Easy access to a variety of clinical interventions and support for help-seeking
- Restricted access to highly lethal means of suicide
- Strong connections to family and community support
- Support through ongoing medical and mental health care relationships
- Skills in problem solving, conflict resolution and nonviolent handling of disputes
- Cultural and religious beliefs that discourage suicide and support self-preservation



Helen and Arthur E. Johnson
Depression Center

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO **ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS**