

## Risk Factors and Warning Signs

**DISCLAIMER:** The information on this site is intended to help users learn about suicide and suicide prevention. It is provided for informational and referral purposes only. The web site should NOT be used as a substitute for medical advice, counseling, or other health-related services or as a replacement for the services of a trained medical or mental health professional. For medical or mental health advice, services, and treatment, consult your primary care physician or a qualified mental health care professional.

### RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

**Definition:** 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 suicidal behavior. Protective factors, on the other hand, reduce the likelihood of suicide. They enhance resilience and may serve to counterbalance risk factors.” (From [www.sprc.org](http://www.sprc.org))

#### Risk Factors<sup>1</sup>

##### *Biopsychosocial Risk Factors*

- Mental disorders, particularly mood disorders, schizophrenia, anxiety 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
- Barriers to accessing health care, especially mental health and substance abuse treatment
- Certain cultural and religious beliefs (for instance, the belief that suicide is a noble resolution of a personal dilemma)
- Exposure to, including through the media, and influence of others who have died by suicide

#### Protective Factors<sup>2</sup>

- Effective clinical care for mental, physical and substance use 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

### 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 they might exhibit some of the following warning signs:

- Talking about suicide, death, or preoccupation with dying. 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 overeating)
- Intensity of distress and agitation accompanied by depression.
- Significant changes in behavior and/or personality
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Loss of interest in activities, work, school, hobbies, or social interactions
- Deteriorating physical appearance
- Giving away prized possessions and saying goodbye
- Previous suicide attempts



- 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
- Stockpiling medications
- Buying a gun
- Taking a sudden interest or losing interest in religion
- Getting ones affairs in order - paying off debt, getting a will, getting life insurance
- Scheduling medical appointments for vague symptoms

**Here is an easy mnemonic to remember these warning signs:<sup>3</sup>**

***IS PATH WARM?***

- I** Ideation
- S** Substance Abuse
- P** Purposelessness
- A** Anxiety
- T** Trapped
- H** Hopelessness
- W** Withdrawal
- A** Anger
- R** Recklessness
- M** Mood Changes

If you or someone you know is suicidal, get appropriate help. Take action. Call 1-800-273-TALK.

<sup>1</sup> Suicide Prevention Resource Center

<sup>2</sup> Suicide Prevention Resource Center

<sup>3</sup> American Association of Suicidology