

# Suicide Risk Factors and Warning Signs

- Suicide is very complex
- There are generally warning signs before someone takes their life – warning signs that either signal distress or suicidal thoughts or plans
- Some warning signs are more visible than others, so it's important to sensitize our “radar” as much as possible to detect even subtle changes in behavior
- If you see someone exhibiting warning signs, it is important to reach out to them and offer support
- Engaging someone who is suicidal in a caring conversation can help them open up
- Ask directly about suicidal thoughts
- There are certain factors that put some people at higher risk for suicide, we call these risk factors
- Risk factors for suicide can include health conditions, genetics and life stressors
- In each instance of suicide risk, there is not thought to be a single cause, but rather multiple converging risk factors that increase risk during a period of time in the person's life
- Although one might be at higher risk for suicide, there are real skills one can learn to decrease their risk for suicide (through proven therapies like CBT therapy, developing and using a safety plan)

## Risk factors

Risk factors fall into three groupings:

### 1. Biological

Part of your biological makeup. Some things in one's biology puts one at a higher risk for suicide. For example, some biological factors that might increase one's risk include:

- Having any predisposition to depression, or another mental health condition
- Genetics play a role in suicide risk
- Males have higher risk than females likely related to multiple biological and socializing factors
- Presence of chronic pain or some chronic medical illnesses
- Traumatic brain injury

## 2. Psychological risk factors

How you see the world, interpret events, approach and solve problems. Some psychological factors that might increase suicide risk include:

- Tendency to interpret events as negative
- When negative things happen in life someone who doesn't have the ability to adapt and adjust (is not cognitively flexible). Rigid, all-or-nothing type of thought patterns. Perfectionistic tendencies.

## 3. Historical risk factors

Things that have happened in one's past can affect one's suicide risk. These life events that might put someone at greater risk for suicide include:

- Having a past suicide attempt
- Having a family member die by suicide
- Having a parent who struggled with their mental health
- Having history of substance abuse
- Childhood trauma, childhood abuse, especially sexual abuse

It's important to note that while we can't change the past, suicide risk can be mitigated by working through the effects of past events, for example by engaging in therapy to process trauma, or getting treatment for addiction or any other mental health condition.

## Warning signs

Warning signs fall into three groupings:

### 1. Talk

- Talking about suicide: about wanting to die, or using language indicating feelings of hopelessness, desperation or not seeing a future. Talking about gaining access to the means to take their life (pills or a firearm, etc.). Talking about death a lot. Talking about feeling like they are a burden to others.

### 2. Behavior

- Changes from the person's usual patterns of behavior, such as withdrawing from usual interests/activities, behaving in an agitated manner, losing their temper more than usual. Taking steps to access lethal means, researching suicide methods, self-harm behavior, preparing for a suicide, rehearsing suicides (like visiting a bridge), giving personal items away, changes in their usual patterns of behavior including sleeping or eating, or if substance use increases.

### 3. Mood

- Mood depressed, anxious, agitated, exhibits rage behavior. Shame or humiliation. Feeling of being trapped (like in prison or a feeling of being trapped.) Important thing is that it's a change from their normal mood. You can also be cautious when someone who is struggling suddenly seems much better with no explanation of why, it might be because they have a plan to take their life.
- Often we can see how a person's mood is through what they say, through their talk.
- The biggest warning sign to look out for is change from their usual patterns, in behavior or talk.
- If you see someone exhibiting one or more of these warning signs, don't be afraid to ask them if they are okay and to check back in with them later.