Northeast and Caribbean (HHS Region 2)
MHTTC Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Assessing for Risk of Suicide

Suicide is a significant public health concern with suicide rates increasing over 30% in the past 10 years. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among people ages 10 to 34, the fourth among people ages 34-54, the fifth for people ages 45-54, and the tenth leading cause of death overall (www.cdc.gov/suicide). While these statistics are alarming, it's important to remember there are factors that can protect against suicide and steps that can be taken to intervene and provide support. This guide provides the basics for assessing for risk of suicide.

Asking the Question

Asking someone if they are thinking about killing themselves can feel very uncomfortable. Despite this, it's important that you clearly and directly ask the question. You can choose to introduce the topic in a variety of ways, but you then need to ask the question, "Are you thinking about killing yourself?". Do not use euphemisms, be direct and matter-of-fact. Below are some examples.

**Sometimes when people are really sad or depressed, they think about killing themselves.
Are you thinking about killing yourself?**

**When people are really overwhelmed with feelings, they sometimes think about killing themselves.
Are you thinking about killing yourself?**

**There are times when everything seems to be going wrong in our lives and we just want to die. During this time, we may think we are better off dead and may want to do something to kill ourselves.
Are you thinking about killing yourself?**

Valuable Information to Gather

Ask the person if they have thought about a plan to kill themselves. Make sure you get answers to the following questions (3 W's).

- **What is/was the plan you are/were thinking about?**
- **Where are/were you going to kill yourself?**
- **When are/were you thinking about killing yourself?**

Do you have access to means to kill yourself (e.g., guns, pills)?

Have you ever tried to kill yourself in the past? If yes, how? When?

Did you ever receive help/treatment after you tried to kill yourself?

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Making a Referral

Connecting someone who is thinking about killing themselves to mental health services can be a protective factor against suicide.

Make the referral with the person in the room.

Confirm that an appointment or evaluation is being scheduled.

Arrange for someone to accompany the person to the referral source.

Imminent Risk

If you determine that the person is at imminent risk and is in need of immediate assessment and services, please call 911 or your local emergency number.

Don'ts

Don't leave the person alone

Don't take their word that they will seek help or guarantee that they will not kill themselves.

Don't always take responses at face value.

Don't just give a person at risk helpline numbers and let them go.

Dos

Do make sure you have helpline numbers handy to give to the person even if you are making a referral.

If you suspect that they are not being honest, err on the side of caution and refer out.

Do make sure you/someone has eyes on them at all times.

Do make sure you have a relative/guardian with them once they leave your sight.

There are several formal, evidence-based assessments that you can use to help guide you through the suicide assessment process. Please access and review these guides:

Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale C-SSRS: bit.ly/3ttcumi | Ask Suicide-Screening Questions (ASQ): bit.ly/3goxQ0k

If you need help for yourself or someone else, contact the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or chat online at suicidepreventionlifeline.org

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For more information, contact northeastcaribbean@mhttcnetwork.org

¡Hablamos español!

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