

Risk and Protective Factors



Suicide prevention seeks to reduce the factors that increase suicide risk while increasing the factors that protect people from suicide.

Risk Factors

Risk factors are characteristics of a person or his or her environment that increase the likelihood that he or she will die by suicide (i.e., suicide risk).

Major risk factors for suicide include:

- Prior suicide attempt(s)
- Misuse and abuse of alcohol or other drugs
- Mental disorders, particularly depression and other mood disorders
- Access to lethal means
- Knowing someone who died by suicide, particularly a family member
- Social isolation
- Chronic disease and disability
- Lack of access to behavioral health care

Risk Factors Can Vary Across Groups

Risk factors can vary by age group, culture, sex, and other characteristics. For example:

- Stress resulting from prejudice and discrimination (family rejection, bullying, violence) is a known risk factor for suicide attempts among [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender \(LGBT\)](#) youth.
- The historical trauma suffered by [American Indians and Alaska Natives](#) (resettlement, destruction of cultures and economies) contributes to the high suicide rate in this population.
- For men in the middle years, stressors that challenge traditional male roles, such as unemployment and divorce, have been identified as important risk factors.

Protective Factors

Protective factors are personal or environmental characteristics that help protect people from suicide.

Major protective factors for suicide include:

- [Effective behavioral health care](#)
- [Connectedness](#) to individuals, family, community, and social institutions
- [Life skills](#) (including problem solving skills and coping skills, ability to adapt to change)
- Self-esteem and a sense of purpose or meaning in life
- Cultural, religious, or personal beliefs that discourage suicide

Precipitating Factors and Warning Signs

Precipitating factors are stressful events that can trigger a suicidal crisis in a vulnerable person. Examples include:

- End of a relationship or marriage
- Death of a loved one
- An arrest
- Serious financial problems

Warning signs are behaviors that indicate that someone may be at immediate risk for suicide. For more, see our [Warning Signs](#) page.

- [About Suicide](#)
- [Effective Prevention](#)
- [Resources & Programs](#)
- [Training & Events](#)
- [News & Highlights](#)
- [Organizations](#)

Warning Signs for Suicide



Immediate Risk

Some behaviors may indicate that a person is at immediate risk for suicide.

The following three should prompt you to immediately call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or a mental health professional.

- Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself
- Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or obtaining a gun
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live

Serious Risk

Other behaviors may also indicate a serious risk—especially if the behavior is new; has increased; and/or seems related to a painful event, loss, or change.

- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings

[National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#)

1-800-273-TALK (8255)

The Lifeline is a 24-hour toll-free phone line for people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress.

An [online chat option](#) is also available.

The Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) is supported by a grant (1 U79 SM062297) from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). No official endorsement by SAMHSA or DHHS for the information on this website is intended or should be inferred.

SPRC is a project in EDC's Health and Human Development Division.

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