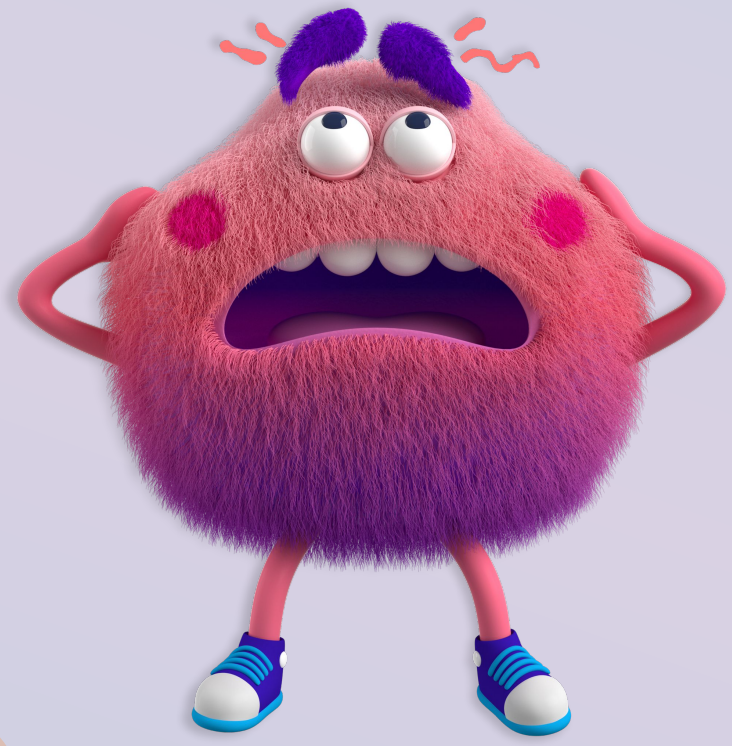

Feeling Overwhelmed?

Suicide Prevention

Suicide rates continue to increase in the United States, particularly among vulnerable populations. The chances are high that as a paraprofessional, you will interact with individuals who are at an increased risk for suicide. It is important to understand that suicide is preventable. With knowledge of risk factors and warning signs, you can help to identify individuals at increased risk. By using tools that effectively reduce risk, you can enhance the safety of those you serve and save lives.

Learning Objectives

After taking this course, you should be able to:

- Recognize risk factors, protective factors, and warning signs for suicide.
- Identify your role in screening individuals to reduce their risk for suicide.
- Summarize five steps you can use to promote safety for adults at increased risk for suicide.

Why Screening for Suicide?

Suicide Is a Major Issue

Suicide is death caused by intentional self-injury. A suicide attempt is when someone causes self-injury with the intention of killing themselves but they do not die from their actions (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], n.d.).

Myths about Suicide

Suicide only affects individuals with a mental health condition. While having a mental health condition does in some cases increase the likelihood of suicide, only about 50% of suicides are linked to mental illness.

• **Once an individual is suicidal, they will always be suicidal.** This is not true. Most suicides can be prevented by removing lethal means and connecting the individual with the help they need. Once the individual has the help they need, they can pass through the suicidal period.

• **Most suicides happen without warning.** Most often, warning signs do occur before a suicide. Unfortunately, people frequently miss them because they do not know what to look for. More than one in five individuals who took their own lives expressed their intentions first.

• **Suicide is a selfish act.** Individuals who have thoughts of suicide do not choose to have them. It can be hard to understand how someone could be in so much pain that they would want to die. When someone plans to take their own life, they often think their loved ones would be better off without them.

• **Talking about suicide will lead to or encourage suicide.** Several studies have shown that asking people about suicidal thoughts or plans does not increase the likelihood that suicide will occur. Talking about suicide is a necessary step in preventing suicides. People who are thinking about or planning suicide are often relieved they can talk to someone about what they are experiencing.

Risk Factors Related to Suicide

The following are some of the risk factors for suicide (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention [AFSP], n.d.; Caine, 2017; CDC, 2021; NIMH, n.d., SAMHSA, 2019):

- Prior suicide attempt
- Substance use or misuse
- Mental health problems
- History of violent or aggressive behavior
- Access to lethal means such as medications, razor blades, or guns
- Knowing someone who died by suicide, especially a family member
- Chronic disease, physical pain, and/or disability
- Recent diagnosis of terminal illness for the individual or their loved one
- Recent death or significant loss such as the death of a spouse or breakup of a relationship
- Lack of access to behavioral healthcare
- Social isolation or loneliness
- History of abuse, neglect, or exploitation
- Intimate partner/domestic violence
- Legal and financial problems

Protective Factors Related to Suicide

Protective factors reduce the risk of negative outcomes or impacts. Protective factors can reduce the likelihood of an individual attempting or dying by suicide.

The following are proven factors that help protect people from suicidal actions (CDC, 2021; SPRC, n.d.):

- Coping and problem-solving skills, including the ability to regulate emotion
- Ability to adapt to change
- Sense of purpose or meaning in life
- Cultural and religious beliefs that value life
- Connections to friends, family, and community support
- Supportive relationships with care providers
- Availability of effective physical and behavioral healthcare
- Existing responsibility to care for children, pets, etc.
- Limited access to lethal means such as guns
- Healthy self-esteem

Warning Signs Related to Suicide

The more you understand how to recognize warning signs for suicide, the more capable you will be of preventing it. Unlike risk factors, warning signs are indications that an individual is at imminent risk for suicide. Imminent risk means that there is the potential for suicide to occur in the near future. They may be planning an attempt. It is not too late to help an individual if they are showing warning signs.

In fact, it is even more important to respond effectively if you notice any of the following warning signs in someone you support (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2019; SPRC, n.d.):

- They communicate wanting to die or kill themselves.
- They are researching suicide methods.
- They have recently obtained a lethal method.
- They show a dramatic change in mood or behavior.
- They tell you they feel hopeless, trapped, or like a burden.
- They increase their use of drugs or alcohol.
- They are very anxious, agitated, or act recklessly.
- They express rage or want revenge.
- They are making final arrangements or giving possessions away.

Populations at Higher Risk for Suicide

Suicide can affect anyone. However, some populations are at higher risk for suicide than others.

- **LGBTQ+ populations**: People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, or as another gender or sexual orientation not supported by society are at higher risk for suicide. This is due to the bullying, discrimination, and sometimes violence they experience based on their identity.
- **Middle-aged men**: Middle-aged men have the highest rate of suicide compared with other groups (SAMHSA, 2021). Due to gender norms and ideas about masculinity, men are less likely to seek help. This is particularly true if they experience challenges that threaten what being a man means to them, including unemployment (Suicide Prevention Resource Center [SPRC], n.d.).
- **Military Veterans**: About 20 veterans die by suicide every day, equaling over 6,000 veteran suicides annually (Adams & van Dahlen, 2020). The highest risk period is when a veteran is transitioning back to civilian life.
- **Residents of rural areas**: People who live in rural areas are at higher risk for death by suicide because of easy access to firearms, higher rates of alcohol and drug use, and lack of healthcare providers (CDC, 2018).
- **American Indians**: Young American Indian men, particularly in the High Plains, are at high risk for suicide when compared with other groups. This group experiences factors such as geographic isolation, historical trauma, poverty, and high rates of suicide in their communities (SAMHSA, 2021).
- **Individuals in jail or prison**: Suicide is the leading cause of death in jails. There are fewer deaths by suicide in prisons than in jails, but in 2013, 6% of deaths of people in state custody were suicides (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2015). The reasons behind the suicide risk in incarcerated people are numerous and complex but include having a likelihood for trauma history and enduring the harsh environments of jails and prisons.

Your Role in Suicide Prevention

You play an important role in the lives of your clients.

Paraprofessionals are often the first to notice when something might be of concern. Because of this, you are uniquely situated to identify and respond to a client who is thinking about or considering suicide. You can make a huge difference.

Your organization should have an established protocol for how to assist individuals who may be suicidal. Your role may vary, depending on your organization's protocol. Generally, you might be asked to assist with:

- Administering mood and suicide screening tools.
- Starting the conversation about suicide risk by asking the right questions.
- Helping the person access needed services and resources.
- Tracking all appointments clients have to ensure that they are well connected with services.

Important: Don't do any of these things alone. Involve a supervisor or another person in your organization to assist and support. This is very important to increase safety of the client and to help you through the process. Don't ever tell a client you will keep their suicidal thoughts or plans a secret.

While a licensed clinician will be completing the formal suicide assessment, you are a crucial part of the initial screening and identification of individuals at risk. It is imperative that you seek assistance from licensed clinical staff at your organization throughout the process of screening individuals who may be at risk.

Five Steps to Saving Lives

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (NSPL) has worked in partnership with other organizations to create a five-step plan to help prevent suicide. By remembering these five steps, you can identify what you need to do when working with a potentially suicidal client. These five steps are (NSPL, n.d.):

- Ask Questions / Show Concern
- Keep them safe
- Be there
- Help them connect / Safety Planning
- Follow up

Suicide Screening Tools

Your organization may train you on how to use screening instruments to identify suicide risk. If not, it is likely you will support the client while a physician or behavioral health professional completes an assessment.

These are tools commonly used to screen for suicide risk:

- Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST)
- Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale (C-SSRS)
- Suicide Assessment Five-Step Evaluation and Triage (SAFE-T)
- Question, Persuade, and Refer (QPR)

Suicide Resources

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
https://afsp.org/
Crisis Text Line
https://www.crisistextline.org
Text HEAL to 741741
National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals
https://nadsp.org/
National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention
https://theactionalliance.org
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/
1-800-273-TALK (8255)
Suicide Prevention Resource Center
http://www.sprc.org/
Suicide Safety Plan (Inquiry Health, LLC)
A free app available via the App Store or Google Play
Trans Lifeline
https://translifeline.org/
877-565-8860

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