

What Influences the Risk of Suicide?



Central East (HHS Region 3)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
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Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth and young adults and is a public health concern at all ages.¹ Fortunately, there is a role all of us can play to help prevent suicide. Part of this involves understanding the reasons that contribute to why some people think about or attempt suicide, and what we can do to address those reasons.

RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

People are complex, so we often use a socio-ecological model to better organize all the different elements that influence their life. The socio-ecological model includes elements related to the individual (such as age) and environment (such as neighborhood lived in). The likelihood that someone may attempt suicide is influenced by these various individual and environmental elements. These elements are also called risk factors (elements which increase risk) and protective factors (elements which decrease risk). By understanding which risk and protective factors are relevant to a person we can better understand what may be causing them to consider suicide.³

ALMOST 1 IN 5 HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN 2019 HAD SERIOUS THOUGHTS OF SUICIDE AT LEAST ONCE²

THE SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL MODEL

INDIVIDUAL

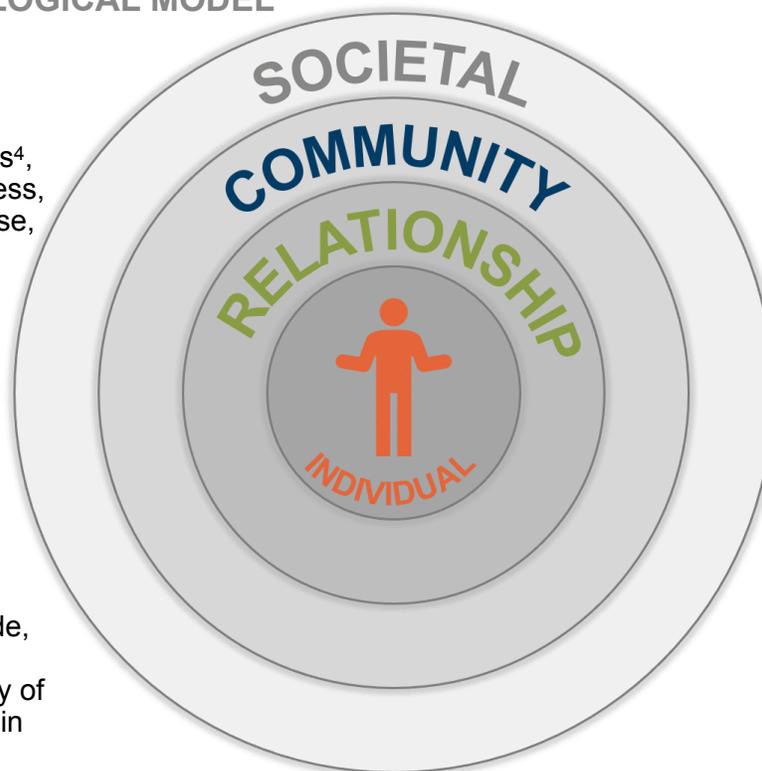
Factors specific to a person's own life.

Personal demographics⁴, Feelings of hopelessness, History of substance use, Impulsive tendencies, Previous suicide attempts, Problem solving skills

RELATIONSHIP

Factors specific to a person's close social circle.

Family history of suicide, End of a relationship, Social isolation, History of being bullied, Change in family socio-economic status



SOCIETAL

Factors specific to broader social or cultural trends. Stigma against seeking behavioral health care, Cultural and religious beliefs, Economic and social inequalities

COMMUNITY

Factors specific to a person's surrounding community. Local epidemic of suicide, Access to behavioral health care, Community connectedness

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

Social determinants of health are another way of thinking about how the elements in someone's life can affect their risk of suicide, or likelihood of any other health outcomes. These overlap with risk and protective factors but are organized to focus on the environment around someone and less on the person themselves. Examples of social determinants of health are: Access to safe housing and transportation, Experiencing racism and discrimination, and Access to quality education and health care services.

WARNING SIGNS OF IMMEDIATE OR SERIOUS RISK

It is also equally important to be able to recognize the warning signs that someone is in immediate or serious risk of attempting suicide. They include⁵:

- Talking about suicide
- Talking about feeling hopeless or trapped
- Talking about not wanting to be a burden on others
- Searching for lethal means
- Giving away possessions or saying goodbye
- Changes in mood and regularly having negative moods
- Showing signs of depression (e.g., loss of interest in activities, sleep disturbances, fixating on past problems)
- Increasing use of alcohol or other drugs
- Withdrawing from social commitments
- Major changes in sleep patterns

WHAT CAN WE DO?

There are concrete steps we can take, both to help people at increased risk of suicide and help people experiencing an urgent suicide crisis. If someone is showing warning signs of immediate or serious risk⁶:

- Encourage them to contact a suicide prevention hotline
- Encourage them to seek treatment
- Offer to help them get support
- Encourage them to talk with you
- Be respectful of their feelings
- Offer reassurances that things will get better
- Encourage them to avoid alcohol or drug use
- Do NOT be patronizing or judgmental
- Do NOT promise to keep it a secret

If someone is at increased risk due to known risk factors or social determinants of health in their life:

- Learn more about the issue and how it may be affecting them
- Consider how you may be personally impacting the issue and what you could change
- Consider the role you could play in trying to address a community or societal issue
- Recognize and respond if they are beginning to show warning signs of immediate or serious risk

If you believe a suicide attempt is imminent, stay with the person and call 911. Additional information is contained in the [Central East Suicide Prevention Resource Guide](#)⁷

NOTES

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020). Wide-ranging Online Data for Epidemiological Research. Underlying Cause of Death Results-2018. Available at <https://wonder.cdc.gov/>
2. CDC (2018). Suicidal Ideation and Behaviors Among High School Students — Youth Risk Behavior Survey, United States, 2019. Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/su/pdfs/su6901a6-H.pdf>
3. Suicide Prevention Resource Center (n/d). Risk and Protective Factors. Available at <https://www.sprc.org/about-suicide/risk-protective-factors>
4. Certain demographics are considered to be at greater risk for suicide than others due to underlying systemic issues and traumas. For more information, see: <https://www.sprc.org/scope/racial-ethnic-disparities>
5. Suicide Prevention Resource Center (n/d). Warning Signs for Suicide. Available at <https://www.sprc.org/about-suicide/warning-signs> & American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (n/d). Risk Factors and Warning Signs. Available at <https://afsp.org/risk-factors-and-warning-signs>
6. Mayo Clinic (2018). Suicide: What to do when someone is suicidal. Available at <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/suicide/in-depth/suicide/art-20044707>
7. For more information, see: <https://mhttcnetwork.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Central%20East%20PTTC%20Suicide%20Prevention%20Resource%20Guide.pdf>

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