



ELDER SERVICES SUICIDE PREVENTION TOOL KIT



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PURPOSE:

This tool kit is a concise suicide prevention resource for service providers who may encounter potentially suicidal elders. It presents information for identifying possible suicide risk and intervening to safely help the client. It should complement suicide prevention training.

No one is immune from suicide risk; the information given here applies to you and those you work with as well as your clients.

1. BASIC CONCEPTS:

- A suicide attempt may occur when an individual has both intent to die and the capability for potentially lethal self-harm.
- A desire to die may result from an individual's *belief* that he is a burden to those he cares about and/or is disconnected from those important to him.
- A capability for lethal self-harm may result from past attempts, abuse, trauma, exposure to violence, pain, disability, or mentally rehearsing a suicide plan.

2. CHAIN OF LIFE:

- Look for (i) early signs of suicide risk, (ii) warning signs of suicide, and (iii) danger signs
- Screen for suicide intent or desire to die
- If high risk persuade the client to accept immediate help; if no imminent risk refer to help
- If high risk, and offer of voluntary help is declined, call 9-1-1 and/or seek involuntary psychiatric care
- If low risk (no imminent danger), refer to community behavioral health provider

3. EARLY SIGNS OF SUICIDE RISK:

- Talking about being trapped, losing control
- Initiating or increasing alcohol/Rx drug use
- Withdrawing from family/friends/activities
- Manifesting anxiety/agitation/sleep problems
- Mood changes, anger, growing pessimism
- Persistent and growing self-criticism
- Cognitive deficit; rigid, black/white thinking

4. WARNING SIGNS OF SUICIDE:

- Escalating impulsivity/negative behavior
- Marked personality/mood change
- Withdrawing from family/friends
- Indifference to activities/interests
- Being present-oriented/vague on future
- Texting/talking/writing/drawing about death
- Giving away/disregard for possessions/pets

5. DANGER SIGNS OF SUICIDE:

These are earliest detectable indicators of very high suicide risk in near-term (minutes, hours, days):

- Threats to hurt or kill self
- Looking for/acquiring lethal means
- Voicing a specific suicide plan (when/how)

Any of these signs indicate that an elder may need an emergency psychiatric evaluation.

6. SUICIDE RISK FACTORS:

- U** Unconnected; weak social supports; loss
- N** Negative/pessimistic view of self/future
- S** Shame due to humiliation/victimization
- A** Attempt/abuse history
- F** Family history of suicide; mental illness
- E** Emptiness/depressed/sad/hopeless

7. SCREENING FOR SUICIDE INTENT:

- Do you feel that you are not part of anything?
- Do you feel that people would be better off without you?
- Have you thought of suicide?
- Have you had thoughts about suicide in the last two months?
- Are you thinking about it right now?

8. SCREENING FOR CAPABILITY:

- Have you hurt yourself without intent to die?
- Have you experienced abuse, violence, pain, serious injury, or trauma? Are you a Veteran?
- Do you have the means to take your life?
- Have you mentally practiced a suicide plan?
- Have you tried out a suicide plan in any way?

One or more “YES” answers to questions about both INTENT and CAPABILITY may indicate HIGH suicide risk

9. HOW TO HELP:

- Assess situation for safety of all parties
- Listen and say that you care; be direct
- Assure client knows that he/she is not alone
- Make sure client knows what's going on
- Try to keep client from possible means (*only if this can be done safely; otherwise await police*)
- Do not leave him alone or let him leave alone
- Call 9-1-1 or MCES (610-279-6100)

REFERENCES:

Joiner, T. (2005) *Why People Die by Suicide* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Rudd, M. et al. (2006) “Warning signs for suicide: Theory, research, and clinical applications” *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior* 36(3) 255-262

Van Orden, K, & Yeats, C. (2011) “Suicides in later life” *Current Psychiatry Reports* 13(3) 234-241.

Yeats, C. et al. (2011) “Suicide in older adults” *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* (2011) 34(2) 451-468.

MORE INFORMATION:

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention – www.afsp.org

American Association of Suicidology – www.suicidology.org

Suicide Prevention Resource Center – www.sprc.org