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Intellectual Disability and Suicide Risk

What's the problem?

Persons with intellectual disability have problems with intellectual functioning and everyday social skills, and are vulnerable to psychosocial and environmental factors linked to suicidal behavior. Suicidal intent has been found in individuals with IQs below 50 who made suicide attempts by hanging, stabbing, jumping, or drowning. Research reports serious attempts by individuals with more moderate intellectual disabilities who had depressive episodes and recent significant social losses. A study found that one-third of respondents with intellectual disability felt "life is not worth living." Individuals with intellectual disabilities are at risk along the entire continuum of suicidal behavior from ideation to completing suicide. This may not be widely recognized because intellectually disabled persons may not be identified as such among suicide attempters and completers.

What contributes to this problem?

Adolescents with intellectual disability may endure social rejection and stigma in school, the community, and even at home. Like most young people they want to be accepted by their peers and not be seen as "different." They may recognize and feel the negative social aspects of their disability. As children and adults they are at increased risk of being victimized. Adults may be exposed to suicide risk factors including interpersonal stressors, depression and other psychiatric disorders, substance abuse, serious financial and legal issues, loss and bereavement, other traumas, and job and housing problems. They may have fewer buffers to suicide risk in the form of resilience, coping, problem solving, and help-seeking skills.

How does suicide risk arise in persons with intellectual disability?

A current suicide theory posits that a suicide attempt may occur if there is an extremely strong desire to die and the capability for lethal self-harm. A desire for death can come from believing one is a burden to others and/or that one does not belong. Individuals with intellectual disability may see themselves as having a negative impact on their families. A belief of being a burden may begin early and be amplified by later school and job-related problems. Difficulty with social norms or understanding the consequences of personal acts may lead to feeling disconnected from peers, family, and providers. A sense of being trapped by one's situation adds to risk. A history of self-injury and physical abuse may create a self-harm capability.

How can suicide risk be reduced in the intellectually disabled?

The first step is to promote community acceptance that suicide risk is a reality among intellectually disabled persons and that this must be taken into consideration by programs that serve them. Next family members and providers must be educated in regard to suicide risk factors, possible warning signs of suicide, and basic suicide crisis intervention skills. Police, other emergency responders, and corrections staffs must be better informed about nature and prevalence of intellectually disability and possible suicide risk in this population. Individuals manifesting suicidal behavior should be assessed for intellectual disability. Intellectually disabled persons who come to the attention of the human services system should be screened for suicide risk. Overall suicide prevention must be put on the intellectual disabilities agenda and the risk inherent to intellectual disability must be acknowledged in suicide prevention plans at every level.