



## Protective Factors

When considering those at risk of suicide the focus is most often placed on identifying risk factors and warning signs that indicate the individual might be considered at elevated risk. However the great majority of people who may have an elevated risk profile do not go on to attempt or complete suicide. Why is this? The answer lies in an individual's protective factors.

Protective factors are characteristics; traits; life experiences; practices; skills; strengths; or meaningful connections that help people deal more effectively with stressful events and moderate or act as a buffer to protect against suicide. Essentially they are those characteristics that make it less likely that individuals will consider, attempt, or die by suicide.

There has been a great deal of research into risk factors associated with increased suicide risk, however, there has not been as an extensive or as rigorous examination of protective factors. Most people can readily name multiple suicide risk factors yet find it challenging to name more than a few protective factors.

A popular misconception is that the absence of a risk factor is of itself a protective factor or that protective factors are simply the opposite of risk factors. This is not necessarily the case. For example a prior history of suicide attempts is widely associated with an elevated risk for future suicide. However, having no prior history of

attempted suicide should not be regarded as a protective factor.

The strength and value of a protective factor to an individual is not static and will likely vary over time and with age, race, sex, culture and demography. They can be viewed as internal, which can be improved with treatment training or education, or external which can often be mobilised or managed when trying to manage risk. Those occurring within the individual can include coping skills, impulse control, conflict resolution skills, genetic predispositions, personality traits, personal resilience or problem solving skills. They may also occur at a spiritual level where membership and participation in religious and spiritual communities that do not condone suicide have long been perceived to be protective (Durkheim, 1951 [1897]). Alternately, external protective factors can be identified in such things as current life circumstances and relationships (e.g. family support, occupational security).

The development of suicide risk is a complex and uniquely individual process encompassing the ever-changing relationship of a multiple array of risk and protective factors. As a result the task of evaluating suicide risk is not just a matter of running through a checklist of risk and protective factors.

Although protective factors can act as a counterbalance to risk factors and enhance the individual's resilience, it is important to

remember that the mere presence of protective factors does not guarantee that an individual will not take his or her own life. What may be protective to one individual may actually be a risk factor for another. For example connection to family (eg. spouse, partner, siblings) is often regarded as a protective factor, however this connection may lie anywhere along a continuum from supportive to destructive.

The challenge for those supporting people who may be at risk is to uncover the presence of any protective factors and their significance to the individual and where necessary to support or facilitate their development.

It is however hopeful and reassuring to remember that like certain risk factors, some protective factors are modifiable and individuals can work to increase their individual protective factors. Further, similar to that of risk factors and suicide risk, protective factors can change considerably over time and may be influenced both positively or negatively by individuals, life events, their impact and their meaning.

### **Known Protective Factors Include:**

- Personal resilience – associated with positive coping styles, problem solving skills and adaptability.
- Social Connectedness – a sense of connection to others through family, school or community. Strong positive relationships, particularly with family members, but also with workmates, as well as the wider community that enhance the persons sense of belonging
- Significant other – e.g. presence of a caring adult for a child, presence of a caring partner

- Positive sense of self and sense of control of life circumstances, self-determination
- Sense of meaning, spirituality, values and beliefs – i.e. belief that suicide is wrong
- Safe and stable environment and economic security – economic security is protective, particularly in older people
- Mental and physical health, self-esteem, and ability to deal with difficult circumstances, manage emotions, or cope with stress
- Access to Treatment – early detection and treatment of disorders such as depression
- Restricted access – restricting access to weapons, controlling prescription of certain drugs
- Social skills, e.g., decision-making, problem-solving, and anger management
- A healthy fear of risky behaviours and pain
- Hope for the future—optimism
- Hopefulness: Having reasons for living
- Economic security in older age
- Opportunities to participate in and contribute to school or community projects and activities
- Responsibilities and duties to others
- Pets
- Support for help seeking

## Important Things to Remember

- **Protective factors can reduce the likelihood of suicide**
- **These listed are those that research has found to have strong statistical links with suicide**
- **Although we cannot completely eliminate suicide risk, we can decrease it either by decreasing risk factors and / or increasing protective factors**
- **Protective factors are the building blocks to resilience**
- **Protective factors vary from individual to individual**
- **Whilst numerous protective factors may be present, this does not guarantee that a person will not take his or her own life**

*To learn more about Suicide and how you could help in the fight against suicide, contact TALK SUICIDE Support Service on 1800 008 255 to discuss tailoring a training package to suit your needs.*

TALK SUICIDE Support Service is an initiative of Suicide Prevention Pathways Inc. (SPP) offering programs that educate, raise awareness and above all provide emotional and practical support to those at risk of suicide and their family and friends. For more information visit [spp.org.au](http://spp.org.au) or call us on 1800 008 255.

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