



Suicide - Risk Factors

Suicide does not discriminate and every suicide is a single journey. People of all genders, ages, and ethnicities are at risk for suicide. Suicide is not a disease – it does not have a set of clearly defined symptoms or a predictable pathway. However, research has found that there are some characteristics, traits, life events that lead us to attribute a greater risk of suicide to people who have had those experiences. These are what we call risk factors. While suicide risk factors are thought to increase the possibility of suicide it is important to recognize that they do not predict it.

Protective factors can be seen as the actions, practices or meaningful connections which provide some protection against acting on thoughts of suicide. We will be talking more about protective factors in a future edition.

It is important to remember that simply identifying risk factors does not by itself allow even the most experienced professional to predict with any degree of accuracy, who will complete suicide at some future time, and who will not. For example although statistics tells us that men are three to four times more likely to die through suicide it does not tell us which men.

The mere presence of a risk factor or factors does not mean that a person is at risk to suicide. Similarly the absence of apparent risk factors does not mean that an individual is not at risk.

So how does this help us in preventing suicide?

Being aware that someone may be at increased risk tells us that that individual needs supporting. The form that support should take will vary with each individual.

What can be important in understanding suicide risk is the role of 'meaning' Many people can be impacted by the same circumstance, yet only a small percentage might ever consider suicide, and only a small percentage of those will ever complete suicide. It is not necessarily the job loss, or relationship breakdown, or financial setback that is important, but the *meaning* that it has for the individual concerned. What may seem relatively trivial to one person may be viewed as 'the last straw' for another.

Suicide risk factors and suicide risk are not static. They can change considerably over time and may be influenced positively or negatively by individuals, life events, their impact and their meaning.

There are few 'suicide' risk factors that are uniquely associated with increased suicide risk. Most are also risk factors for other outcomes as well. For example the loss of employment carries a statistically higher risk to suicide. However it also carries an increased risk for depression, relationship breakdown, homelessness, social isolation and financial distress, each of which may also increase the risk to suicide.

Some risk factors such as male gender or a prior suicide attempt are generally regarded as carrying a long term risk while others such as unemployment, financial distress are generally regarded as modifiable.

Another way of viewing risk factors is that many have a component of loss or grief. Loss of a job, health, relationship, culture, status, hope etc. A significant loss, or a loss that has significant meaning, or an accumulation of losses may carry an increased risk to suicide.

Just as risk factors are regarded as increasing the statistical risk for suicide protective factors are regarded as helping to reduce the risk to suicide.

Therefore, risk and protective factors can be seen as being those events or circumstances which may either individually or collectively alter an individual's statistical likelihood of complete suicide.

Some Known Risk Factors Include:

- Previous suicide attempt(s)
- History of mental disorders, particularly clinical depression
- History of alcohol and substance abuse
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Impulsive or aggressive tendencies
- Isolation, a feeling of being cut off from other people
- Barriers to accessing mental health treatment such as unwillingness to seek help because of the stigma attached to mental health and substance abuse disorders or to suicidal thoughts
- Loss (relational, social, work, or financial)
- Physical illness
- Easy access to lethal methods

Important Things to Remember

- Risk factors increase vulnerability but do not predict suicide
- Many Risk factors exists
- These listed are those that research has found to have strong statistical links with suicide
- For risk factors we know about we can take steps to address these through support, treatment and early intervention
- There are many we don't know about
- It's important not to focus on some more than others as any aspect of an individual could be a risk factor
- Key themes to note include population membership such as gender and ethnicity
- An event itself may not be the risk but rather what the event means to the person
- Whilst numerous risk factor may be present a person may have a strong coping mechanism which acts to reduce the risk

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 or call us on 1800 008 255.

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