

CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION

NATIONAL CENTER FOR INJURY PREVENTION AND CONTROL

SUICIDE: RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Risk Factors

The first step in preventing suicide is to identify and understand the risk factors. A risk factor is anything that increases the likelihood that persons will harm themselves. However, risk factors are not necessarily causes. Research has identified the following risk factors for suicide (DHHS 1999):

- Previous suicide attempt(s)
- History of mental disorders, particularly depression
- History of alcohol and substance abuse
- Family history of suicide
- Family history of child maltreatment
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Impulsive or aggressive tendencies
- Barriers to accessing mental health treatment
- Loss (relational, social, work, or financial)
- Physical illness
- Easy access to lethal methods
- Unwillingness to seek help because of the stigma attached to mental health and substance abuse disorders or suicidal thoughts
- Cultural and religious beliefs—for instance, the belief that suicide is a noble resolution of a personal dilemma
- Local epidemics of suicide
- Isolation, a feeling of being cut off from other people

Protective Factors

Protective factors buffer people from the risks associated with suicide. A number of protective factors have been identified (DHHS 1999):

- Effective clinical care for mental, physical, and substance abuse disorders
- Easy access to a variety of clinical interventions and support for help seeking
- Family and community support
- Support from ongoing medical and mental health care relationships
- Skills in problem solving, conflict resolution, and nonviolent handling of disputes
- Cultural and religious beliefs that discourage suicide and support self-preservation instincts