How do I know if someone is thinking about suicide?

Suicide is a mostly preventable cause of death and an important issue for communities and individuals to engage with.

Many people who are considering suicide give warning signs or signals of their intentions, however, these signs may not be obvious. To understand how to prevention suicide, it is useful to know what puts people at risk ("risk factors"), what we can do to protect people from these risks ("protective factors") and learn how to recognise any warning signs and respond to them.

Risk and protective factors

The reasons that people take their own life are very complex. There is no single reason why a person attempts or dies by suicide.

Though every person’s experience is unique, there are many factors that can influence whether someone is likely to consider suicide. These are known as risk factors. On the other hand, protective factors can improve a person’s ability to cope when they are struggling with life.

Risk and protective factors are often direct opposites. For example, social isolation (i.e. being distant from or not having access to people we can socialise and interact with) is a risk factor, whereas social connectedness (i.e. regular and satisfying interaction with others) is a protective factor.

Risk and protective factors can be influenced by individual characteristics, social context and the environment. Examples include:

- Mental and physical health
- Self-esteem
- Ability to deal with difficult circumstances
- Ability to manage emotions, or cope with stress
- Relationships and involvement with others such as family, friends, workmates, the wider community
- Our sense of belonging
- Quality of life, in terms of social, political, environmental, cultural and economic factors.

Risk and protective factors do not explain everything about a person’s risk of attempting suicide. Individuals will respond differently to life events using a variety of coping mechanisms. Some people will recover quickly from an adverse event while others will experience long-term disruption. Page 2 lists a number of specific risk and protective factors.

Warning signs, tipping points and signs of imminent risk

There are warning signs and tipping points that can alert others that a person is at risk of suicidal behaviour. Particular behaviours and actions can signal that a person is at imminent risk of suicide. Further information is provided on Page 3.
Applying our knowledge of risk and protective factors in the community

Knowing about the risk and protective factors can guide us on how we can act at a community level to help prevent suicide. Prevention strategies generally focus on finding ways to influence various risk and protective factors to reduce suicide and suicidal behavior.

A life event will affect each person differently depending on the context in which it occurs and how the individual responds to changing life experiences. The influence of risk and protective factors on individuals will vary widely and therefore they should not be used as a ‘checklist’ to assess individual risk. For example, the complex interplay of individual, social, and environmental factors that might put a teenage girl at risk of suicide would often be different from those that increase the risk of an elderly retired male.

### Risk factors

**Examples of individual risk factors:**
- Gender (male)
- Mental illness or disorder
- Physical health problems
- Alcohol or other drug problems
- Emotional problems such as low self-esteem and feelings of hopelessness
- Poor coping skills
- Lack of purpose in life

**Examples of social risk factors:**
- Family conflict
- Abuse and violence
- Separation and loss
- Isolation from society
- Rejection by peers
- Incarceration
- Family history of suicide
- Poor communication skills

**Examples of environmental risk factors:**
- Poverty
- Unemployment and economic insecurity
- Homelessness
- Social or cultural discrimination
- School disengagement
- Lack of support services
- Neighborhood violence and crime

### Protective factors

**Examples of individual protective factors:**
- Gender (female)
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Good physical health
- No alcohol or other drug problems
- Good self-esteem
- Personal resilience associated with good coping and problem-solving skills
- Positive outlook and purpose in life

**Examples of social protective factors:**
- Social connectivity through family, school, or community
- Physical and emotional security
- Caring parents and family
- Supportive social relationships
- No family history of suicide
- Good communication skills

**Examples of environmental protective factors:**
- Financial security
- Employment
- Affordable and safe housing
- Equitable and tolerant community
- Positive schooling experience
- Access to support services
- Safe and secure living environment
Warning signs, tipping points and signs of imminent risk

There are signs that may give an early warning that a person is thinking about suicide. If others can recognise these warning signs there is an opportunity for them to intervene. People who have been thinking about suicide often experience an event that may be the trigger (or tipping point) for them. The tipping point will be different for each individual. Imminent risk is the point where the risk of a suicide attempt is highest. The warning signs, tipping point and signs of imminent risk will not necessarily occur sequentially.

### Warning signs

Examples of warning signs:
- Experiencing feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness
- Feeling trapped or feeling that they have no options
- Talking about death or suicide even in a joking way
- Engaging in reckless or risky behaviours
- Increased use alcohol or other drugs
- Seeking access to something they can kill themselves with
- Signs of anxiety or agitation, including difficulty concentrating or sleeping
- Being moody, withdrawn or sad
- Saying goodbye or giving away possessions
- Losing interest in things they previously enjoyed
- Taking less care of their appearance or personal hygiene
- A history of previous suicide attempts.

*Remember, most people will show some of these signs at some time without having thoughts of suicide.*

**Source:** Commonwealth of Australia. (2007). Living is for Everyone (LIFE) – Research and Evidence in Suicide Prevention. Department of Health and Ageing: Canberra

### Tipping points

Examples of tipping points:
- Recent experience of loss (e.g. death of a family member or pet, job loss or end of a relationship)
- Major disappointment (e.g. a missed promotion at work or failed exams)
- Change in circumstances (such as divorce, retirement, separation or children leaving home)
- Onset or episode of mental illness or disorder
- Onset or episode of physical illness or injury
- The death by suicide of someone they know or recognise
- Financial or legal problems.
- Media report about suicide
- Being abused, bullied or subjected to violence.

### Imminent risk

- Expressed intent to die
- Has plan in mind
- Has access to lethal means
- Impulsive, aggressive anti-social behaviour.