

# Identifying Clients for Suicide Risk Assessment: Key Risk Factors to Consider

The following is a list of risk factors to consider when assessing all clients. These factors can help inform your understanding and formulation, and any of them should prompt you to screen for suicide risk. Please note, however, that this list is not exhaustive, and there is no strong evidence that a higher number of risk factors directly equates to a higher risk. Lastly, it's important to acknowledge that accurately predicting who will die by suicide remains a significant challenge.

## *1. Individual Risk Factors*

### **Psychiatric and Substance-Use Disorders**

- Mood Disorders: Major Depressive Disorder, Bipolar Affective Disorder
- Schizophrenia or Other Psychotic Disorders
- Personality Disorders: Particularly Cluster B (e.g., borderline personality disorder)
- Eating Disorders
- Adverse child-hood events and trauma
- Co-occurring and complex psychiatric presentations
- Substance Use Disorders: Particularly alcohol intoxication and dependence

### **Previous Suicide Attempts**

- History of Attempts: Significantly increases risk
- Escalating Attempts: Increase in lethality

### **Chronic Medical Conditions**

- Chronic pain, cancer, neurological disorders, or disability.
- Medical conditions with limited or no expected recovery.

### **Family History**

- Family history of suicide, mental illness, or substance use disorders.

### **Neurocognitive and Behavioural Factors**

- Impulsivity: Acting on suicidal thoughts without planning, particularly common in ADHD.
- Emotional Dysregulation: Difficulty managing intense emotions like frustration, anger, or sadness.
- Deliberate self-harm / non-suicidal self-injury
- Neurodiversity (sensory overwhelm, masking, impulsivity, bullying and social isolation)

## 2. Environmental and Social Factors

- Death of a Loved One (elderly losing a spouse, loss of a child particular in first month).
- Divorce or Separation: From a spouse or children (also need to screen for domestic violence).
- Access to Lethal Means: Firearms, large amounts of medication, rope.
- Exposure to Suicide: Witnessing, hearing about, or exposure to suicide by peers or others (contagion effect).
- Inadequate Support Systems: Isolation or lack of close relationships.
- Bullying, Harassment or domestic violence: High rates of victimisation, particularly for young people.
- Stigma: Associated with seeking help for mental health issues (particularly but not exclusively in NESB and CALD backgrounds).
- Socioeconomic Challenges: Unemployment, poverty, or housing instability, financial stress, job loss, or legal issues.

## 4. Behavioural and Warning Signs

- Expressions of Hopelessness: Verbal statements like "I can't go on" or "Life isn't worth living."
- Withdrawal: Isolating from friends, family, or activities.
- Finalising Behaviours: Creating a will, writing letters goodbye, sudden acts of generosity, giving away pets.
- Increased Risk-Taking Behaviours: Drug use, reckless driving, or lack of regard for own safety.
- Sudden Mood Changes: A noticeable shift to calmness or relief after being distressed.

## 5. Protective Factors

- Future focused.
- Appropriate help-seeking and rapport.
- Engagement in safety planning, and allowing for carers to be involved.
- Strong social support and connections.
- Skills in problem-solving and coping.
- A sense of purpose or responsibility (e.g., caregiving roles).
- Cultural or religious beliefs discouraging suicide.

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