



VA/DoD CLINICAL PRACTICE GUIDELINE FOR THE ASSESSMENT AND MANAGEMENT OF PATIENTS AT RISK FOR SUICIDE

Department of Veterans Affairs

Department of Defense

Patient Summary

Version 2.0 – 2019

I. What should I do if I am having thoughts of self-harm or suicide?



If you or someone you know has thoughts of self-harm or suicide, you should reach out.

Go to the nearest emergency room, mental health clinic or primary care clinic. These are your best options. Any of these places have excellent resources, and usually include the availability of mental health professionals, to keep you safe and provide immediate care. Care is available at emergency rooms 24/7. Clinics are typically open during business hours and are often able to see you the same day.

II. Can I talk to someone about my thoughts?

Yes—if you go to an emergency room or mental health clinic, you will be evaluated face-to-face by a caring, attentive clinician who is licensed to care for people struggling with suicidal thoughts. Treatment usually includes medication, talk therapy, or both.

If you are a Veteran or Service Member, and you cannot access onsite care, or you feel you are not ready to see a professional in-person, you may call

Veterans/Military Crisis Line toll-free at:



Or text: 838255 to speak with a trained responder, many of whom are also Veterans themselves. You decide how much or how little to share.¹

III. What should I discuss with my provider?

Starting a conversation with your provider about mental health can mean the difference between a tragic outcome and a life saved.

If you, or others close to you, have noticed changes in your behavior or moods, or if you have not felt like yourself lately, those are important observations to share with your provider. Just like physical health, mental health is essential to your overall well-being.

It is also important to know:



For almost every mental health condition, there are several effective treatments that can help reduce your symptoms and improve your quality of life.



Different types of treatment are available. You can work with your provider to determine the one that is best for you. VA and DoD specialize in providing care for Veterans and Service Members. VA and DoD clinicians can help you find the right combination of care for your unique situation.

¹ <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/>

IV. What are some of the factors and warning signs that increase the risk of suicide?

Challenging life events such as unemployment, divorce, retirement, illness, or injury can be stressful and at times feel overwhelming. In some cases, Veterans and Service Members may experience despair and depression and may have thoughts of suicide.

Who is at elevated risk for suicide?

Although risk factors do not cause a behavior or outcome to occur, they may be associated with an increased risk for the behavior or outcome. Ongoing research has identified various risk factors associated with suicide and these include, but are not limited to:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Chronic major mental illness or personality disorder | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Limited coping skills |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> History of prior suicide attempt(s) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Relationship conflict or distress |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> History of substance use disorders | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Unstable housing or employment problems |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Chronic pain | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Limited ability to identify reasons for living |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Chronic medical condition | |

Warning signs for suicide

Warning signs are a person’s “red flags” that signal an increase in their risk for suicide. These can be thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and/or images. Warning signs may vary from person to person. In many cases, individuals will exhibit one or more warning signs at a time. Some warning signs include:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Thinking about or making plans to die by suicide | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Putting personal affairs in order (e.g., giving away possessions, making a will) |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Engaging in self-destructive or risky behaviors | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Feelings of hopelessness |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Saying final goodbyes to friends and family | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Increased anger or agitation |

If you or someone you know exhibit(s) warning signs for suicide, it is important to address the concerns immediately, intervene, and seek help from a healthcare professional. This professional will typically talk to the person about their warning signs and any suicidal thoughts they are having. They will also probably identify coping skills that can be used and review how to get additional support if needed. They might refer the person to mental health care, which could include medication, talk therapy, both, or other treatments. Connecting yourself or someone you know who is showing warning signs for suicide with a healthcare professional can help save a life.

There is *treatment*. There is *hope*.

V. What treatments are available?

You can get better! There are lots of treatment options and getting help is the first step. You and your provider will work together to determine the best treatment plan for you. Your safety and improvement are the most important parts with the goal of fewer symptoms and less concerning thoughts of hurting yourself while planning for times when that happens. There are many different treatment options for preventing suicide such as therapies, medications, and decreasing or limiting access to lethal methods. Treatment can occur during a hospital stay, in a clinic or in a more structured program where you do not stay in the hospital. Therapy, or talk therapy, focuses on counseling where you discuss your problems with a mental health provider either individually or among a group. Medication may reduce your symptoms. You can talk to your provider for more information. Other steps for care such as reaching out with phone calls and home visits are also helpful.

VI. What can I expect from treatment?

Treatment is focused on several things:

- Your safety
- Your preferences
- Regular follow up
- Taking care of other symptoms
- Improvement of coping skills
- Education, therapy, and medications as needed

Treatment is aimed to:

- Reconnect you with what is important to you
- Restore your social function (e.g., activities, connections with others)
- Address issues resulting from the physical or emotional pain (e.g., depression, poor sleep, poor diet)
- Improve your quality of life
- Increase your healthy lifestyle (e.g., reducing the use of tobacco and alcohol)

VII. You can find more information at The National Institute of Mental Health Information Resource Center:

- <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/suicide-prevention/index.shtml>
- <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml>