This fact sheet provides a summary of important information for pre-service teachers about suicide. You can find other fact sheets about suicide and mental health problems under the Education section on the Response Ability web site: www.responseability.org

Risk factors do not cause, but may increase the probability of, a certain outcome - while protective factors make a negative outcome less likely. A knowledge of risk and protective factors can be a guide to options for support and prevention. However, having a number of risk factors does not necessarily mean that a person will attempt suicide.

Risk and protective factors for suicidal behaviour are still topics of active research and there is some debate over the relative importance of different factors. Much of the research has focussed on youth suicide and elderly suicide, however many of the known factors are applicable across the lifespan. A number of risk factors have been identified for suicidal behaviour. They can be divided into several categories.

Risk Factors - Individual and personality

- Male gender – suicide rates are higher in males than females, across all age groups.
- Psychological / emotional problems – eg introversion, poor self-esteem, social inadequacy.
- Behavioural problems – eg impulsivity, anger, aggression, violence, risk-taking.
- Sexual orientation – some studies suggest higher rates among same-sex attracted people.
- Physical health problems – chronic or painful illness, disability, onset of a serious illness.
- Stressful life events – loss of significant person or relationship, conflict, legal problems.

Risk Factors - Mental health problems / illness

- Major depression – a particular depressive disorder associated with high risk of suicide.
- Other depressive illnesses – for example bipolar disorder, postnatal depression.
- Substance use disorders – abuse or dependence on alcohol or other drugs.
- Antisocial behaviour – for example in conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder.
- Psychiatric history – any previous history of a mental illness requiring psychiatric care.
- Previous suicidal behaviour – any previous history of attempted suicide.

Risk Factors - Family issues

- Family breakdown – divorce or separation may raise vulnerability to depression, suicide.
- Family conflict – conflict, violence, high or low parental control, parental mental illness.
- Child Abuse – a history of abuse, whether neglect, physical, sexual or psychological.
- Family History – any family history of suicidal behaviour can be an indicator of greater risk.

Risk Factors – Social Issues

- Socio-economic disadvantage – social and economic problems in family and community.
- Indigenous communities – higher rates of suicide especially among young men.
- Migrant populations – certain groups have higher rates eg some females and the elderly.
- School disengagement – lack of connection to school, suspension, truancy, dropping out.
- Unemployment – lack of social contact, poorer sense of identity & purpose, lower income.
- Isolation – for example social isolation, bullying, homelessness, isolation by circumstances.
- Rural / remote – rates of suicide higher in some areas, particularly for young men.

**Risk Factors – Environmental**

- Access – ready access to lethal methods (eg to firearms) may increase the risk of suicide.
- Media – some types of reporting increase risk of suicidal behaviour in vulnerable people.
- Exposure to another suicide – when a friend or family member has died by suicide.

**Protective Factors**

A number of factors have been identified which seem to reduce the probability of suicidal behaviour. In general, health and security – and a sense of connection to others – seem to be helpful in preventing suicide.

- Connectedness – a sense of connection to others through family, school or community.
- Significant other – eg presence of a caring adult for a child, presence of a caring partner.
- Personal resilience – associated with positive coping styles and problem solving skills.
- Spirituality and beliefs – sense of meaning, spiritual faith, belief that suicide is wrong.
- Economic security – economic security is protective, particularly in older people.
- Good health – positive physical and mental health is protective.
- Treatment – early detection and treatment of disorders such as depression.
- Restricted access – restricting access to weapons, controlling prescription of certain drugs.

**Warning Signs of Suicide**

A warning sign is different from a risk factor. Risk factors may increase the probability that a problem will occur, while a warning sign may indicate that a problem has already begun. While it is difficult to predict who will be at risk of suicide, there are some signs which may indicate that a person is thinking about ending their own life.

If several of these signs occur in a young person, a teacher would be advised to talk to the person and if necessary refer them to the school counsellor or another professional for detailed risk assessment.

Some of the possible warning signs for suicidal behaviour include:

- the person has actually threatened to end their own life, verbally or in writing
- statements that indicate hopelessness or suicidal thoughts eg 'Life isn't worth living …'
- less obvious statements that might refer to a decision to end life eg 'It's okay now, soon everything will be fine…'
- changes in behaviour, particularly those that indicate an intention to leave or die – for example, giving away prized possessions, writing farewell notes or making out a will
• persistent physiological complaints such as chronic headaches or other problems, weight loss or gain, sleep problems, exhaustion, missing school or work
• emotional symptoms including withdrawal, seeming hopeless or helpless – or in adolescents, this may manifest as excessive anger and irritability
• changes in behaviour or performance in a young person – truancy, negative conduct, a decline in academic or other areas of achievement (eg sports or interests)

Sources


