

Safety Plans to Prevent Student Suicide

School Resources to Support Military-Connected Students is a project by the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness an applied research center at The Pennsylvania State University and is funded by the Department of Defense Education Activity Grant number HE1254-19-0009.

For more information click on the links below:

<https://schoolresources.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/>

<https://militaryfamilies.psu.edu/>

<https://www.psu.edu/>

<https://dodeagrants.org/>

Our goal is to provide school personnel with free, evidence-based resources to support military-connected students. This training is part of our *Suicide Prevention* series.

Important Reminders

Before starting this training, please read the items below carefully and check the box in front of each item to indicate your understanding.

- The following content discusses suicide and may be upsetting to some individuals.
- Follow all district, local, state, and federal regulations. This training is **NOT** intended to replace or override existing procedures or laws.

Introduction

What is the purpose of this training?

Safety planning can help lower risk of suicide for at-risk students. The process involves student support personnel helping the student identify strategies that will help them cope with their unique circumstances. Safety planning involves the development of a list of both internal coping strategies to help the student when they are by themselves, using social support, and community resources for assistance when necessary. The final result is a safety plan that the student can use during times of distress and crisis.

Objective

The goal of this training is to increase your confidence in your ability to:

Help students at risk of suicide create a safety plan.

How confident are you in your ability to do this now?

Please click on the link below to submit your response.

https://pennstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6Gp3iBH1vhcTluR?modulenumber=suicide24

Verify that you have completed each of the tasks below before proceeding with this training.

Answered the survey question in the link.

Clicked the arrow underneath the survey question to submit your response.

Recorded the ID number provided after you submitted your answer to the survey question. You will need it to complete the survey at the end of this training.

Research

What is most important for me to know?

Evidence suggests that many individuals who consider or attempt suicide are seeking a solution for alleviating psychological pain and distress. A quality, individualized safety plan may provide students with a toolkit of strategies to help them cope with psychological distress and suicidal ideation. As a result of being prepared to use a variety of coping strategies and resources, their risk of engaging in suicidal behavior may be reduced. The Safety Planning Intervention (SPI) developed by Dr. Barbara Stanley and Dr. Gregory Brown (2012) provides a structured approach to the safety planning process.

The SPI model involves identifying strategies within each of the steps below.

Step 1: Recognizing warning signs

One of the most effective ways of averting a suicidal crisis is to address difficulties before they fully emerge. The first step of a safety plan involves identifying the warning signs that immediately precede a suicidal crisis. Being aware of changes in thoughts, moods and behavior that may signal a developing crisis allows the person to act earlier, helping to reduce further risk.

Step 2: Creating a safe environment

The next step involves identifying ways of keeping the person's immediate environment safe by reducing or eliminating their access to potentially lethal means. This step can also include being aware of and avoiding stressful or upsetting situations. Restricting access to lethal means may also include: asking someone else to manage access to medication, preventing access to firearms by removing them from the home, and preventing access to sharp items that might be used to cause self-harm.

Step 3: Identifying reasons to live

Experiencing suicidal ideation is often mentally consuming, and it can be hard to see the positive things in life that bring joy and meaning. The student can remember things they enjoy or can look forward to experiencing by having a pre-written list of reasons to live.

Step 4: Internal coping strategies

Suicidal thoughts can make it hard to focus on anything else. Internal coping strategies may help the student manage suicidal ideation and could potentially prevent a future crisis. The student's self-confidence in managing suicidal thoughts can be improved knowing they have already identified coping strategies to utilize as a primary response. Soothing self-talk, deep breathing, physical exercise or walking outside, and other strategies may all be useful ways for individuals to comfort and distract themselves.

Step 5: Socialization strategies for distraction and support

Students can also provide distraction from suicidal thoughts by being around other people. This may include spending time with family and friends or going to a location the student enjoys where there are other people. This strategy is really about spending time in a social environment, not necessarily discussing their thoughts and feelings. Remind the student they should avoid social environments where alcohol or other drugs might be involved. Specifically listing names and contact information for friends, family, or even clergy on the plan will help students to remember that there are people who want to spend time with them and are willing to help.

Step 6: Trusted contacts for assisting with a crisis

It may be helpful for students to identify individuals that they feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings with. The student should consider who would be most helpful in a crisis. It is important to avoid listing individuals who could possibly make the situation worse. Ideally, those individuals who are listed as trusted contacts for discussing their distress should be contacted when creating the plan to specifically enlist their help when it is needed (e.g., aunts or uncles, grandparents, close friends, or family friends).

Step 7: Professional contacts for assisting with a crisis

The final strategy involves identifying professional and emergency support services the student can contact in a time of crisis. Including both local crisis numbers and national hotlines are important. Utilizing any chat or text based resources may also be helpful.

Some students may not want to include some of the strategies presented above in their safety plan. This is okay. Everyone's plan is individualized and deeply personal. The priority is to be safe. There may be some instances in which certain strategies are not helpful or cause more stress. If this is the case, these strategies can be excluded. Even though safety plans are meant to be followed step by step, remind the student that if they feel at imminent risk and are unable to remain safe, they should seek emergency help immediately.

Application

How might this look in my professional practice?

The goal of this training is to increase your confidence in your ability to:

Help students at risk of suicide create a safety plan.

When you are safety planning with a student, you may have to ask questions in order to encourage the student to really consider their responses carefully, thus maximizing the effectiveness of the safety plan. Below are some questions that you can ask to prompt the student to respond. Read each prompt and identify which aspect of the SPI model it is encouraging the student to consider.

My warning signs

- How will you know when your safety plan should be used?
- What are some of the difficult, feelings and behaviors that point to crisis?

My reasons to live

- What's the best thing about living?
- What's the most important thing in your life?
- What things in your future do you look forward to?

Making my space safe

- Are there any specific situations or people that you find triggering?
- What thing do you have access to that are likely to be used in an attempt?
- How can we develop a plan to limit your access to suicidal means?

Things I can do by myself

- What can you do on your own to avoid acting on suicidal thought?
- What can you do to help take your mind off your problems, even for a short time?

People and places I can connect with

- Who helps you to feel good when you socialize with them?
- Where can you go and be around other people in a safe environment?

People I can talk to

- Who can you talk to when you're having suicidal thoughts?
- Who do you feel you could contact to support you during a suicidal crisis?

Professional contacts

- Which services could you turn to for support?

Implementation

How can I effectively implement this content in my professional practice?

Please review the considerations below regarding potential implementation strategies, barriers to implementation, and collaboration strategies related to this content. This will help you coordinate the next steps as you begin to incorporate the information presented in this training into your professional practice.

This information can also be found on a handout that you will be able to download at the end of this training.

Implementation Strategies

- Some professionals are still utilizing “no harm contracts”. This strategy has not demonstrated effectiveness and all members of the crisis team who participate in risk assessment should be trained on using safety planning techniques.
- Develop forms that can easily be completed that include prompts for questions, blank spaces for student information and plan specifics, and local/ national resource phone numbers and websites.

Overcoming Barriers to Implementation

- Role play developing safety plans with case vignettes on an annual basis to stay current.
- Be sure to develop and review safety plans with parents/ legal guardians whenever possible.
- Be sure that copies of the safety plan are maintained by both professionals and the student and family.

Collaboration Strategies

- Enlist support of local agencies and professionals who can consult and assist when necessary.
- When in doubt, always consult with a crisis team member to ensure that you have adhered to all crisis procedures.

Resources

Are there any resources available to help me implement this content?

Click on the link below to download a tool that you can use to implement this content in your professional practice. This tool includes a fillable version of the safety plan template that was shared in this training.

<https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:c5e7696a-cec3-4498-a1dd-e8f980362281>

Below you can find another potential safety plan template that may be helpful for you in your professional practice.

<https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/6f351b1d-5ae1-4308-855c-eacec363cfc2/downloads/07%20Safety%20Plan%20Form%20Fillable.pdf?ver=1600961345451>

Feedback

How can I help improve this training?

The objective of this training was to increase your confidence in your ability to:

Help students at risk of suicide create a safety plan.

Answer the questions in the link below to let us know how well this training increased your confidence in your ability to accomplish this objective. Once you have answered all of the questions, click the blue arrow button underneath to submit your responses.

https://pennstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_d771mLr9ZgW3kyx?modulenumber=suicide24

Verify that you have completed each of the tasks below.

Answered all of the survey questions above. You may have to scroll to see all of the questions.

Clicked the arrow underneath the last survey question to submit your responses.

Additional Readings

Where can I learn more about this content?

The following resources were used to create this training. If you would like more information about the information presented in this training, we encourage you to start here.

Beyond Blue. (n.d.). Retrieved October 16, 2020, from <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/beyondnow-suicide-safety-planning/information-for-health-professionals>

Stanley, B., & Brown, G. K. (2012). Safety Planning Intervention: A Brief Intervention to Mitigate Suicide Risk. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, 19(2), 256-264. doi:10.1016/j.cbpra.2011.01.001

Stanley, B., Brown, G., Brenner, L., Galfalvy, H., Currier, G., Knox, K., . . . Green, K. (2018, September 1). Comparison of the Safety Planning Intervention With Follow-up vs Usual Care of Suicidal Patients Treated in the Emergency Department. Retrieved October 16, 2020, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6142908/>.

Thank You!

Thank you for taking the time to complete this training. If you have any questions or comments, please email us at schoolresources@psu.edu.

Proceed to the next training

Click on the link below to move on to the next training titled *Programs and Counseling Treatments for At-Risk Students*. In this training, you will increase your confidence in your ability to identify evidence-based programs and counseling treatments for at-risk students.

https://learning.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/school-resources/modules/suicide_25-programs-and-counseling-treatments-for-at-risk-students_201022/

Return to the module directory

Click on this button to return to the module directory.

<https://schoolresources.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/modules/>