Assessing Risk in Suicide Risk Assessment: From Prediction to prevention
What to Ask, How to Ask, and What to Do
Moving from a prediction-oriented system of assessment towards a prevention-oriented risk formulation.

Fig. 1 Prevention-oriented risk formulation
Long Term Risk Factors

Any Factor that is associated with the long term risk for suicide

Short-Term Risk Factors

Behaviors or Situations that are indicative of Imminent Risk. Part of the Short-Term Risk Assessment

Imminent Indicators

Behaviors or contexts that are highly associated with Imminent Risk. Part of the Short-Term Risk Assessment

Individual Factors

What you know about the particular person, their patterns, their triggers, their vulnerabilities, their past behavior

Individual Protective Factors

Factors associated with prevention or decreased likelihood of acting on suicidal thoughts or urges

Clinical Algorithm

The synthesis of all your knowledge, data, experiences, understanding, perceptions that define clinical judgment

Suicide Risk Formulation

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### Getting from Long-Term Risk to Imminent Threats of Suicide

#### The Presence of One or More of the following Long-Term Risk Factors
- Past Suicide Attempt
- Past Non-Suicidal Self-Injury
- History of Mental Health Diagnosis (BPD, Bipolar, Depression, Schizophrenia)
- History of Multiple Mental Health Diagnoses
- Ongoing Sleep Difficulties
- Loss of Loved One
- Marginalized Community
- Low Social Support/Rejection from Family
- Unemployment
- Chronic Physical Pain

#### The Presence One or More of the Following Short-term Indicators
- Current Suicidal Intent
- Means/Method Available
- Lethal Means Available
- Vague Plan
- Very Specific Plan
- Precaution against discovery
- Current Substance Use
- Currently alone or will be alone
- Anhedonia
- Concentration difficulties
- Prompting event for previous attempt
- Sudden Loss or Negative Life Event
- Abrupt clinical change (pos/neg)
- Hopelessness
- Current Major Depressive Episode
- Turmoil/Anxiety/Panic
- Global Insomnia
- Current psychosis
- Impulsivity

#### Absence of the Following Protective Factors
- Hope for the Future
- Attachment to Life
- Attachment to Therapy or Therapist or Helper
- Health and Supportive Social Support Network
- Belief in ability to solve the problem setting off suicidal crisis
- Responsibility and attachment to children, family, pets or others/community
- Imbedded in protective community
- Strong faith beliefs
- Fear of attempting suicide
- Believes suicide is immoral and possesses high spiritual affinity
- Willing to follow a plan
- Expression of wanting to live
- Access to helping relationship

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**Assess**

Ask the right questions: (1) Are you planning to kill yourself? (2) Do you plan to kill yourself in the next 24 hours? (3) What is your plan? (4) How Intent are you on killing yourself? (5) How accessible is the means and plan?

**Consult**

Consult with your colleagues, supervisor, other relevant prof. How credible does the person seem? How genuine? Is there possibility of ensuring the person is not left alone?

**Plan**

Create a plan to stay safe - Obtain commitment from the person to not kill themselves. Alert other staff. Implement precautions if necessary.

**Orient**

Here is what is going to happen...
Because of our worry about your safety, here is what we are going to do.

**Document**

Document the questions you asked and their response
Document your impressions of their credibility
Document the plan that they committed to following
Document that the person will not be left alone
Document that the means/or method was removed

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What to Assess

**Suicidal Thoughts and Urges**

Assess the presence of suicidal ideation:
“are you having thoughts of killing yourself?”

Assess intensity of suicidal ideation:
“on a scale of 0-10, how intense are your current thoughts to kill yourself?”

Assess duration of suicidal ideation:
“when thoughts of suicidal pop into your mind, how long to they typically stick around?”

Assess intensity of suicidal urges:
“on a scale of 0-10, how intense are your current urges to kill yourself?”

**Plan and Intent**

Assess the presence of a plan:
“have you thought of a plan to kill yourself?”

Assess specificity of plan:
“When would you plan to kill yourself?
“Where would you plan to kill yourself?”
“How would you plan to kill yourself?”

“are you taking precautions so that if you act, no one can stop you or interfere or save you?”

Assess intensity of intent:
“how intent are you in carrying out your plan to kill yourself?”

“on a scale of 0-10, how intent are you in acting on this plan?”

**Access to Means**

Assess the presence of means:
“do you have access to a gun? Do you have access to lethal dosages of medications? Do you have access to poisons?”

Assess for presence of means for any previous suicide attempts:
“in the past, what means did you utilize to attempt to kill yourself?”

**REMOVE ACCESS TO MEANS!**

Always remove/restrict access to the means

Never leave a person or isolated who is at high risk

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# Suicide Risk Assessment Fidelity Checklist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assess for Suicidal Thoughts and Urges</th>
<th>Overall Strength of Assessment: Strong</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Okay</th>
<th>Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assess For Presence of Suicidal Ideation</strong></td>
<td>Did the Assessor Ask: &quot;are you having thoughts of killing yourself? Or are you thinking about killing yourself in the next 1 hour to 1 week?&quot;</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Some version of statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assess For Intensity of Suicidal Ideation</strong></td>
<td>Did the Assessor Ask: &quot;on a scale of 0-10, how intense are your current thoughts to kill yourself?&quot;</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Some version of statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assess for Duration of Suicidal Ideation</strong></td>
<td>Did the Assessor Ask: &quot;when thoughts of suicide pop into your mind, how long do they typically stick around?&quot; or &quot;how long have these thoughts about killing yourself been around?&quot;</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Some version of statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assess For Intensity of Urges</strong></td>
<td>Did the Assessor Ask: &quot;on a scale of 0-10, how intense are your current urges to kill yourself?&quot; or &quot;how intense are your current thoughts of killing yourself compared to thoughts you have had in the past about killing yourself?&quot;</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Some version of the statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assess for Plan and Intent</strong></td>
<td>Overall Strength of Assessment: Strong</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Okay</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assess For Presence of a Plan</strong></td>
<td>Did the Assessor Ask: &quot;have you thought of a plan to kill yourself?&quot; or &quot;if you did plan to kill yourself, how would you go about it?&quot;</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Some version of the statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assess For Specificity of Plan</strong></td>
<td>Did the Assessor Ask: &quot;when would you plant to kill yourself?&quot; and &quot;where would you plant to kill yourself?&quot; and &quot;how would you plant to kill yourself?&quot; and &quot;are you taking precautions so that if you act, no one can stop you or interfere or save you?&quot;</td>
<td>All 2 out of 4</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assess For Intensity of Intent</strong></td>
<td>Did the Assessor Ask: &quot;how intent are you in carrying out your plan to kill yourself?&quot; or &quot;on a scale of 0-10, how intent are you in acting on this plan?&quot;</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Some version of the statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assess for Access to Means</strong></td>
<td>Overall Strength of Assessment: Strong</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Okay</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assess For the Presence of Means</strong></td>
<td>Did the Assessor Ask: &quot;do you have access to a gun?&quot; and &quot;do you have access to lethal dosages of medications?&quot; and &quot;do you have access to poisons?&quot; and &quot;do you have access to MEANS they stated previous?&quot;</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>All but preferred means</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assess For Presence of Prior Means</strong></td>
<td>Did the Assessor Ask: &quot;based on what you told me about your previous attempt/s, do you current have access to that particular means?&quot;</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Some version of the statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>REMOVE ACCESS TO MEANS</strong></td>
<td>Did the Assessor negotiate for the removal or restriction to access of means?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Tried but refused to remove</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>