# A Guide to Suicide Risk Assessment and Management in Primary Care

## Mitigating Suicide

Suicide is not the inevitable outcome of suicidal thoughts. Suicidal thoughts occur in response to emotional and physical pain. Most people just want to feel better, rather than end their life. Increasing hopefulness, resilience and reasons for living have been shown to reduce suicide risk.

* Asking your patient whether they have suicidal thoughts is the first step in reducing their risk
* Your response needs to be compassionate, proportionate and timely

## Warning Signs

- Expressing suicidal feelings
- Making a will / putting affairs in order
- Depression or other psychiatric disorders
- Increased motivation after starting antidepressants
- Unemployment / poverty / social circumstances
- Past suicide attempt or self-harm / family history
- Increased alcohol / drug use
- Life events; divorce / bereavement / anniversaries

## Protective Signs

- Expressing hope that things may get better in the future
- Not wanting to cause pain and distress for family and friends
- Religious beliefs
- Having a supportive network

## Red Flags

- Marked hopelessness; “I'm a burden”
- Well-formed suicide plans; intent
- Giving away valuable possessions
- Social isolation / lack of support
- Chronic medical illness / pain
- Sense of entrapment

## Assessment

Your next patient may be one who expresses deep despair and suicidal feelings;

- Listen
- Show interest and support
- Talk openly about suicide
- Be non-judgmental
- Offer empathy, not sympathy
- Identify / reinforce protective factors
- Do not make decisions for the patient
- Express your concern about the patient’s safety
- **Offer hope that alternatives are available**
- Take action and involve the patient in decision making; make a safety plan
How to co-create a safety plan

The key is to enable the patient to generate their own reasons for living.

- Actions or strategies to help resist suicidal thoughts
- Names of supportive family and friends
- Professional support
- Voluntary support organisations
- Agreed actions to take when suicidal thoughts become stronger and / or more persistent
- Reduce / stop (as clinically appropriate) alcohol, illicit substance misuse
- Access to crisis ‘out of hours’ support (when people may be at their most vulnerable and ‘the system’ is not obvious to distressed patients or their carers)
- Share the Stay Alive App with your patient, an online suicide prevention resource, which is freely available to access at #StayAlive or via the website below


Management

- Review the patient’s medication, checking for drugs that could be used in lethal overdose (or any other lethal means). Consider quantity available.
- Refer the patient to the appropriate mental health team via the Contact Centre (9-5, M-F on 0800 015 1499) If Crisis is required out of hours, contact CRHTT directly on (0800 169 0398). State that it is a crisis referral and an emergency assessment is required. Follow up your telephone call with the patients’ medical summary by fax (01452-894418). A letter is not necessary if all details have been verbally given when requesting a ‘crisis’ referral.
- If you feel the patient is safe to go home, with later follow-up from local services, ensure you have the patient’s contact details to pass on. It can also be helpful to have family or friends’ contact numbers.
- Offer a follow-up appointment at the earliest time possible and give the patient a list of useful contact numbers, including the Stay Alive App.
- If you judge that the patient is at high risk, encourage them not to leave the practice until appropriate safety measures are in place.
- If the patient leaves against your advice, contact the police and ask for a welfare check.
  The patient may need to be detained under the Mental Health Act.

Referral Options

The Contact Centre 9-5, Monday-Friday Tel: 0800 015 1499
The team consists of experienced mental health practitioners, who are happy to have professional informal conversations with you, to support you in your clinical decision making.

OR The Crisis Team Out of Hours Tel: 0800 169 0398

Support Organisations

Samaritans (24/7) Tel: 116 123 or www.samaritans.org
PAPYRUS www.papyrus-uk.org and HOPELineUK Tel: 0800 068 41 41 is a confidential support and advice service for young people, under the age of 35.

This guide was co-produced by Dr Alistair Smith-GP and “gether NHS Foundation Trust colleagues to support clinical practice in primary care.
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