

# Patient Safety Advisory

Veterans Health Administration Warning System  
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- Item:** **Suicide attempt in the Emergency Room (ER)**
- Specific Incident:** A VA medical center reported that a patient attempted suicide in the ER while awaiting clinical evaluation.
- General Information:** Holiday seasons can present challenges to both patients and staff. For example, holidays can trigger depression or suicidal ideation in patients, and staff may experience increased workload and stress and have added distractions.
- Patients attempt or complete suicide because they have both the will and the opportunity to do so. Staff vigilance in the ER setting is essential since it is the most common area where these patients first present.
- Recommendations:**
1. Staff in emergency rooms should be familiar with the Suicide Risk Assessment Pocket Card (see the Attachment).
  2. Patients appearing to ER staff to be at risk for self-harm should be kept in the line of sight, if possible, while awaiting their evaluation.
  3. During the holidays (e.g., New Years, 4<sup>th</sup> of July, Veteran's Day, Thanksgiving, Winter Holidays, etc), ER staff should be aware of potential risks of holiday decorations (e.g., banners, strings of lights, garland) that are not typically in the environment.
- Additional Information:** Refer to the VA Mental Health Website [http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/MENTALHEALTH/suicide\\_prevention/index.asp](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/MENTALHEALTH/suicide_prevention/index.asp) for additional information regarding suicide prevention.
- Source:** A VA Medical Center
- Contact:** Caryl Lee at the VA National Center for Patient Safety: (734) 930-5890.

**ATTACHMENT**

Suicide Risk Assessment Pocket Card

**ASSESS FOR SPECIFIC FACTORS THAT MAY INCREASE OR DECREASE RISK FOR SUICIDE**

**FACTORS THAT MAY INCREASE RISK**

- Current ideation, intent, plan, access to means
- Previous suicide attempt or attempts
- Alcohol / Substance abuse
- Previous history of psychiatric diagnosis
- Impulsivity and poor self control
- Hopelessness – presence, duration, severity
- Recent losses – physical, financial, personal
- Recent discharge from an inpatient unit
- Family history of suicide
- History of abuse (physical, sexual or emotional)
- Co-morbid health problems, especially a newly diagnosed problem or worsening symptoms
- Age, gender, race (elderly or young adult, unmarried, white, male, living alone)
- Same- sex sexual orientation

**FACTORS THAT MAY DECREASE RISK**

- Positive social support
- Spirituality
- Sense of responsibility to family
- Children in the home, pregnancy
- Life satisfaction
- Reality testing ability
- Positive coping skills
- Positive problem-solving skills
- Positive therapeutic relationship

**ASK THE QUESTIONS**

*Are you feeling hopeless about the present / future?*

**If yes ask...**

*Have you had thoughts about taking your life?*

**If yes ask...**

*When did you have these thoughts and do you have a plan to take your life?*

*Have you ever had a suicide attempt?*



### RESPONDING TO SUICIDE RISK

**ASSURE THE PATIENT'S IMMEDIATE SAFETY AND DETERMINE MOST APPROPRIATE TREATMENT SETTING**

- Refer for mental health treatment or assure that follow-up appointment is made.
- Inform and involve someone close to the patient
- Limit access to means of suicide
- Increase contact and make a commitment to help the patient through the crisis

**PROVIDE NUMBER OF ER/URGENT CARE CENTER TO PATIENT AND SIGNIFICANT OTHER**

**National Suicide Hotline Resource:**

**1 – 800 – 273 - TALK  
(8255)**

References:  
 American Psychiatric Association. Practice Guidelines for the Assessment and Treatment of Patients with Suicidal Behaviors, 2nd ed. In: Practice Guidelines for the Treatment of Psychiatric Disorders Compendium. Arlington VA 2004. (835-1027).  
 Rudd et.al, Warning signs for suicide: theory, research and clinical applications. Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior, 2006 June36 (3)255-62



### SUICIDE RISK ASSESSMENT GUIDE

All patients who present with positive depression screens, history of mental health diagnosis or with any of the Warning Signs listed below should be further assessed for suicide risk.

**LOOK** for the warning signs  
**ASSESS** for risk and protective factors  
**ASK** the questions.

#### LOOK FOR THE WARNING SIGNS

- Threatening to hurt or kill self
- Looking for ways to kill self;
- Seeking access to pills, weapons or other means
- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide

*Presence of any of the above warning signs requires immediate attention and referral. Consider hospitalization for safety until complete assessment may be made.*

#### Additional Warning Signs

- Hopelessness
- Rage, anger, seeking revenge
- Acting reckless or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking
- Feeling trapped – like there's no way out
- Increasing alcohol or drug abuse
- Withdrawing from friends, family and society
- Anxiety, agitation, unable to sleep or sleeping all the time
- Dramatic changes in mood
- No reason for living, no sense of purpose in life

*For any of the above refer for mental health treatment or assure that follow-up appointment is made.*



# National Suicide Hotline

## 1 – 800 – 273 – TALK (8255)