

# Guidelines for Providing a Safe Home Environment for Someone at Risk of Suicide

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Caring for someone who is having thoughts of suicide can feel stressful and scary. There are things you can do however that will assist with managing their safety including the ways in which you connect with them and by removing ways that they might harm themselves.

Your contact with the person can help to keep them safe.

- Having good social connections and support can help someone who is feeling suicidal get help when they need it or to talk about their feelings before they act on them.
- When the immediate risk of suicide is high – check them regularly, know their whereabouts, and do not leave alone for extended periods of time. If you have to leave the house, think about taking the person with you or asking a friend, whānau member or neighbour to sit with them if you have to go out and they cannot or do not want to go with you.
- Include the person in treatment planning and managing safety issues where possible.
- Encourage the person to talk to you about their suicidal thoughts/impulses. You don't need to fix the problem for them or even have to understand their point of view. You just need to show them that you care about them, that you understand they are going through a tough time, and that you are there to support them. Encouraging them and supporting them to get help is also really important.
- Be aware of high-risk periods for that individual – relationship problems or fights with whanau, a court appearance or dealings with the police, transitions in care, times where they might feel ashamed, when their counsellor is absent or on holiday, or anniversaries and be extra aware of checking their safety at these times.
- Be aware of what the person is accessing on the computer. There are many websites which talk about ways which people can suicide and there are sometimes people who might encourage depressed or suicidal individuals to act on their thoughts of harming themselves.
- Monitor what a person is reading and writing on social networking sites, blogging etc.
- Encourage activities that can assist with immediate mood and provide safe alternatives to self-harm and expression of upsetting feelings such as physical activity, art and writing, relaxing activities, contact with positive people.

It is important to treat all threats, ideas, plans or talk about suicide as serious. People who are suicidal may look for ways to hurt themselves at any time, so removing access to things that they could use to hurt themselves is a really important part of keeping them safe.

However, be aware that if one method is removed they may consider another method, so try to prevent access, or minimise the risk of them having access to a range of methods of suicide by thinking about and removing all items that could be used.

Thoughts about suicide come and go and can be acted on impulsively. By removing easily accessible ways in which someone can harm themselves can create some space and time and it can allow feelings about hurting themselves to pass or decrease and/or connection to supports to occur. It also communicates that we are concerned about the person and don't want them to hurt themselves.

It is important to think about all the methods someone could use to hurt themselves in the home. These could include:

### *Hanging*

- Hanging is the most commonly reported way people suicide in New Zealand. It is important to think about the ways which the person you are concerned about might try to hang themselves. These could include;
  - Using belts, scarves, or sashes from dressing gowns.
  - Using rope, cords (e.g., extension cords, or long cords from blinds), or wires.
- It is important to check all potential hiding and storage places around the house for these objects including wardrobes, garages and garden sheds. Hiding ladders or things that people could use to reach somewhere high to hang themselves might also help to make it harder for them to act on their suicidal thoughts.

### *Medications and poisons*

- Ensure that you know the amount and where all medications are and that medications (including Panadol) are locked away after they have been used. In an emergency, medications can be locked in the car boot if there is no lockable storage place in the house.
- Any prescription medication should be stored in a minimum amount. If you get large amounts of medication at one time, you can ask your pharmacist to give you smaller amounts of pills each time.
- Where possible, supervise the person taking of medication to make sure that they swallow it and don't store it up to overdose later. If you are not sure they have swallowed it, you could ask them to open their mouth and check their cheeks and under their tongue.
- Clean out the medicine cabinet regularly and dispose of all unused, out of date medications. Don't keep old medicines that you don't need - take them to your local pharmacy for disposal.

- Ensure poisons and pesticides are locked as far away from the house as possible. Dispose of old poisons and pesticides from garden sheds and garages. This is particularly important on farms and lifestyle properties.
- Cleaning products can also be used by people to harm themselves. Where possible, lock cleaning products like bleach away so that they cannot be swallowed.

### *Firearms*

- Make sure that the suicidal person cannot get hold of weapons including firearms, ramset guns, or air rifles. Where possible remove weapons from the house, farm or property. It may be helpful to give the weapons to someone you trust who lives on another property for safe storage until the suicidal person is feeling better. In emergencies, take the firearm to the local police station for storage.
- If possible, take the weapons apart so that they cannot be useful impulsively. This could include removing the bolt from guns and hiding this and the magazine in a separate place to the main part of the gun.
- Firearms and ammunition are required by law to be locked in safe, separate storage places. Ensure that as few people as possible know where the keys to the gun cabinet and the ammunition storage cabinet are kept. If the suicidal person knows where these are kept, it would be useful to hide them somewhere else so that they do not know how to access them.
- Locking away firearms and ammunition is especially important on farms and rural areas where firearms may be used frequently. If they are used, make sure they are IMMEDIATELY LOCKED away after use.
- If the licensed firearm owner is the person at risk of suicide, remove firearms, gun cabinet storage keys and ammunition from the property. Try to do this in discussion with the suicidal person but be aware that they may not be happy for you to do this and you may have to act without their permission.

### *Alcohol*

- Using alcohol and becoming drunk or intoxicated can increase the risk of someone acting impulsively and doing things without really thinking them through. For someone who is feeling suicidal, having access to alcohol can increase their risk of harming themselves.
- In order to help keep them safe, it is recommended that alcohol is removed from the house, or only small amounts are kept inside.

### *Cars, motorbikes and other vehicles*

- People who are feeling suicidal can often take more risks when driving and can drive recklessly.
- It is also important to know where someone who is, so that you can help to keep them safe. To help you do this, you can prevent easy access to transport (i.e. car keys) so that you know where they are and could reduce their access to harm themselves through a car accident.
- If you are concerned about the person gassing themselves in the car, remove vacuum cleaner hoses from the property. Also be aware if they buy a hose or other tube for no good reason as this could mean that they are thinking or harming themselves this way.

### *Razors, knives and sharp objects*

- Some people like to hurt themselves through cutting when they are feeling upset or suicidal. It is important to think about objects around the house that they could use to hurt themselves and remove these. Things to think about are;
  - Kitchen knives;
  - Razor blades from shaving razors, pencil sharpeners, box cutters and craft knives;
  - Pieces of broken glass and mirrors.
- Remove all of these objects from the person's room and throw them away or hide them somewhere safe.

### **Making a plan to help keep someone safe**

- An important part of helping to manage risk is developing a plan with the suicidal person about how to keep them safe. Your social worker and any involved counsellors or services can work with you and the suicidal person to develop these plans.
- This plan could include;
  - Signs that might show they are feeling worse and need help;
  - Where they can get help including people to call;
  - When to call people or get help if they feel like they are not coping;
  - What are the things that people can do that helps (and the things that don't help so people don't do these);
  - Important contact people (e.g., whānau, social workers, therapists).
- After the immediate risk has passed, it is also important to work with the person to build up their coping skills, hope and resilience. A plan should be made to help them build their future in a positive, strengths-based way and could include;
  - Identifying the things they are good at and finding activities that use and build on these;
  - Building their connections in the community such as with a mentor or a sports team;

- Helping them get into courses, a job, or education;
- Helping them work through any issues that have made them feel bad previously and to develop a plan to help with this;
- Getting treatment for any mental health problems that could be bothering them.

### Places to get help

- Call your local mental health crisis team if you would like the person to be assessed. The contact details for your local team can be found at <http://www.health.govt.nz/your-health/services-and-support/health-care-services/mental-health-services/crisis-assessment-teams>
- Lifeline 0800 543 354
- Suicide crisis line 0508 828 865
- Youthline 0800 376 633 or text 234

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### References

American Psychiatric Association (2010). Practice guideline for the assessment and treatment of patients with suicidal behaviors. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association Press.

WHO (2005). Reducing access to means of suicide. [http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/mhgap/evidence/resource/suicide\\_q7.pdf?ua=1](http://www.who.int/mental_health/mhgap/evidence/resource/suicide_q7.pdf?ua=1)

## CHECKLIST FOR KEEPING YOUR HOUSE SAFE FOR A YOUNG PERSON WITH SUICIDAL THINKING

If you have used this list to make sure your house is safe for a young person who is suicidal, the following list is a summary you can use to check that you have done everything you need to do.

1. Remove all things from the house that the young person could use to hurt themselves. This includes ropes, sharp objects (including razors from the bathroom or pencil sharpeners), weapons etc.
2. Make sure all medication (even Panadol) is locked away or hidden away.
3. Hide all alcohol or only keep small amounts in the house.
4. Hide car keys and make sure that the young person doesn't have access to keys so that they can take off without anyone knowing.
5. If you are able to, talk to the young person about the things that help them feel better and how you can help
6. Think about who needs to know that they young person is having thoughts about hurting themselves and how they can best support the young person (and you).
7. Think about how you can reduce the amount of time the young person spends alone. You may need to keep the door to their room open when they are in it or limit the time they have the door shut. If you go out, who can spend time with the young person?
8. Make sure there is a plan about who to contact if you are worried about them – have a list of important people (e.g., doctor, social worker, mental health team) that you and the young person can contact if they need to.

