

Identifying Suicide Concerns in Young People

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Suicide in young adolescents is a real risk and so any talk or threats of suicide need to be taken seriously. Young people who are highly disadvantaged, are in care, or come from difficult or traumatic backgrounds are most at risk (The Ministry of Health, 2015; Stokes, McCoy, Abram, Byck, & Teplin, 2015). Given the risk for this population all young people involved with Oranga Tamariki – Ministry for Children need to be screened for possible suicidal ideation regardless of whether they have talked about it or not. If a young person has indicated that they have thought about suicide or they no longer want to be alive then they need to be assessed further to determine their degree of risk. Mental health may need to be involved in this but the social worker can also play an important role.

Assessing suicide risk in young people can be challenging but needs to be done to help keep the young person safe. The young person's language skills, understanding about the things they are being asked, and understanding of death all contribute to the challenge of getting accurate information. Sometimes, their level of distress and suicidal thoughts may be expressed in behaviour (e.g., risk-taking) rather than through what they are saying. Because of this, getting information from other sources such as whānau/caregivers is important to help get an accurate picture. When talking to whanau/caregivers, it is also important to consider if the whanau member/caregiver may be minimising risk due to difficulties in acknowledging their young person could feel suicidal and feeling such as shame, anger and frustration. Due to this, it is important to get information from a range of sources as the more information available about what the young person is thinking or planning the easier it is to get appropriate agencies involved (e.g., Mental Health) and put an appropriate plan in place to support them.

Guidelines in asking young people about suicide

Whilst it might be hard or uncomfortable asking young people about suicide, there are several things that you can do that will help you get a more accurate picture of the young person's risk:

- Use direct language when asking about suicidal thoughts or behaviours.
- Ask about suicide in several different ways to make sure the young person understands what you are asking.
- If the young person indicates that they have engaged in suicidal behaviour, it is important to find out both what they did (or intended to do) and what they thought this would achieve.
- It is important to get an understanding of what they wanted to gain from their actions e.g. wanting to be noticed, needing support, or trying to escape from a situation which they have difficulty coping with.

Suggested questions (adapted from Jacobsen et al. 1994)

Asking about Suicidal Ideation and Behaviour

- Validate their feelings (see document on validation).
- Did you ever feel so upset that you wished you were not alive or dead?
- Did you ever do something that you knew was so dangerous that you could get hurt or killed?
- Did you ever hurt yourself or try to hurt yourself?
- Did you ever try to kill yourself?
- What did you do to try and kill yourself?
- What did you think would happen when you did this?
- What made you feel like you wanted to kill yourself?

Assessment of Suicidal Intent

- Did you tell anyone that you wanted to die or were thinking about killing yourself?
- Did you do anything to get ready to kill yourself?
- Was anyone near you or with you when you tried to kill yourself?
- After you tried to kill yourself, did you still want to die, or did you want to live?

Use of prompts may be helpful

- Do you think about killing yourself more than once or twice a day?
- Have you tried to kill yourself since last school holidays?
- What did you think would happen when you tried to [put method they tried here]?
- What would happen if you died; what would that be like?
- Do you know anyone that has tried to hurt or kill themselves?
- Do you know anyone who had died?

If you have a young person who has told you that they feel suicidal or are thinking about suicide, please consult your clinical advisor or help@twb.org.nz, and please refer to the following TWB resources:

1. Guidelines for providing a safe home for someone at risk of suicide
2. Identifying suicide risk
3. Suicide Risk Assessment Prompt Questions

If you would like more help with asking about suicide or are unsure about suicide risk, please contact your TWB clinical advisor or help@twb.org.nz.

References

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