

## Towards Wellbeing

### SCREENING FOR SUICIDE RISK DURING PHYSICAL DISTANCING AND ISOLATION: A HOW-TO GUIDE

Being at home during the isolation period may be helpful for some of your tamariki/rangatahi but may increase the risk for others. Specifically, some tamariki/rangatahi may be more at risk due to whānau spending more time together and whānau members experiencing increased frustration due to restrictions on their activity. This can increase risk by:

- Increased exposure to whānau conflict
- Increased exposure to substance abuse in the home due to people drinking to pass the time
- Increased exposure to domestic violence
- Increased exposure to triggers due to contact with perpetrators and/or not being able to use coping strategies
- Increased exposure to whānau members who may not be supportive, or at worst abusive
- Increased stress in the household due to financial hardship due to loss of income
- A lack of space to use self-regulation strategies
- A lack of contact with friends who tamariki/rangatahi may use to manage their emotion
- A sense of disconnection through not being with friends or being with whānau members who tamariki/rangatahi feel don't understand their difficulties

This means that tamariki/rangatahi are at increased risk if they have the following known risk factors/triggers (NB this does not mean that tamariki/rangatahi who do not have these risk factors are not at risk or that these are the only risk factors):



Conflict with loved ones



Substance abuse



Feelings of social isolation



Feeling constrained, restricted or trapped



Exposure to abusers



Interpersonal sensitivity (getting easily upset by things others say)



Sensory or emotional overload

**The suicide risk tools including the SKS screen and the suicide risk assessment and risk management plan can continue to be used remotely.**

Distancing requirements mean you need to get creative in assessing tamariki/rangatahi and screening them through alternative methods than your usual face-to-face screens. This does not mean that you cannot use the SKS. You should still use the SKS during your screens, you just may need to ask more questions to make sure you get the depth of information as you won't have the non-verbal cues you would have when assessing tamariki/rangatahi face-to-face.

## Things to consider:

1. How well do you know this tamaiti/rangatahi?
2. What technology is available to communicate with them?
3. How comfortable are you using technology to communicate with them? Do they only have text or messenger? Do they have a smartphone or can they video call?
4. How could you modify your questions to cope with not having non-verbal cues?
5. How could they let you know if they were unsafe or couldn't talk at that moment because of people listening?

*It may be useful to consider using a code word of emoji eg., pineapple, which they could send you when they needed to talk but couldn't. Your tamaiti/rangatahi could say something like "I hear PINEAPPLES are good for coughs". They may need to be reminded of this at the start of your conversations as may forget the word. Your code word should be one that is unlikely to come up in daily conversation.*

The basic questions that need to be covered for screening are the same but you may need to ask some additional questions to make sure the young person is able to talk (as per above and below).

## Specific questions to ask tamariki/rangatahi during this time are:

### 1. Do they have space and privacy to answer your questions?

Example: *"I'm going to check in on how you are doing, and it's important we do this with some privacy (or quiet) around you, do you have somewhere you can go where there is no-one else around you?"*

### 2. What is creating stress for them at the moment?

Example: *"Many people are finding being stuck in one place with all their whānau to be quite hard at times, and are struggling with lots of things because of this.... How are you finding it? [pause for an answer and give validation/response to what they say]. What are the most stressful things for you at the moment?"*

***This would be a good time to complete the SKS. You could lead into it by saying... "I'm just going to ask you a few more questions about your stress and how you have been feeling to make sure I really understand what is going on" and then lead into the SKS screen.***

### 3. Are they feeling suicidal?

Example: *"In the past, I have asked you about suicidal thoughts or thoughts about wanting to harm yourself. I'm going to do that now because your daily routine has changed, and particularly because [insert known stressors in here if relevant]."*

- *"Have you had thoughts of hurting yourself?"*
- *"Have you had thoughts of suicide?"*
- Then summarise: *"So I just want to clarify, you have/have not had any thoughts about hurting yourself?"*

If tamariki/rangatahi say that they have had thoughts about hurting themselves, or about suicide, it is important to gather information about what they have been thinking about so an appropriate safety plan can be put in place. Specifically, you want to know:

### 4. How frequent and intense are the suicidal thoughts?

Example: *"Thank you for being honest with me about having thoughts about hurting yourself/suicide. Can you tell me more about those thoughts? Like when do you feel that way? What makes you feel that way? And how often you are thinking like that?"*

**5. If they haven't indicated that they have a plan, ask about the plan**

Example: *"It sounds like these thoughts are bothering you at the moment, have you thought about what you might do to hurt yourself/suicide?"*

It's important to get details of the plan including what they might do; when they are thinking they might do it; what would push them into doing it; and if they have access to means to act on these plans;

**6. Have they acted on these thoughts?**

Example: *Summarise what they have said to you about the frequency of thoughts and the plan, and then say: "It sounds like you have been thinking about hurting yourself/suicide quite a lot, have you ever acted on these thoughts..."*

**7. What makes them feel better when they are feeling suicidal?**

Example: *"It sounds like things have been really stressful, and you have been managing a lot. What has got you through so far?"*

Following this up with asking them if there has been anything else that has been useful.

**As always, and for all of these questions, seek clarification and don't assume that you understand what the person has told you or what they are implying. It's much better to check so that nothing is missed as you may be the only one in their life that is checking on them at the moment.**

Your TWB Clinical advisor and the TWB helpdesk ([help@twb.org.nz](mailto:help@twb.org.nz)) are available as normal to support you in screening for and assessing suicide risk.

**Other things to note:**



**Emojis**

If using a messaging platform like Facebook Messenger, emojis can help convey meaning and validate what you are saying. 😊 Emojis such as sad face emoji can be used after validating that the young person is having a tough time. However, it is important to make sure you understand the emoji before using it, and don't overstate the response from it. For example, don't use the big grin emoji 😄 when they are saying they are just managing to cope but they may be okay, instead the small smiley would be more appropriate. 😊 Consider carefully the use of emojis before using them.



**Documentation**

As always, it is important to document the conversation around safety into CYRAS including how you had the conversation (via phone, via messenger, via video platform like skype or facetime) and include any observations you have. Make sure you note where the young person is and that you have spoken to them about their privacy when talking them as this is important.



**Next steps-  
safety planning**

Once you have answers for the above questions, you will need to consider how you can do safety planning remotely. Please see our "Safety Planning Remotely" document for further information about this.