**RISK FACTORS FOR YOUTH SUICIDE**

Risk factors for suicide refer to personal or environmental characteristics that are associated with suicide. The environment includes the social and cultural environment as well as the physical environment. People affected by one or more of these risk factors may have a greater probability of suicidal behavior. Some risk factors cannot be changed—such as a previous suicide attempt—but they can be used to help identify someone who may be vulnerable to suicide. There is no single, agreed-upon list of risk factors. The list below summarizes the risk factors identified by the most recent research.

Note: The presence of multiple behavioral health disorders (especially the combination of mood and disruptive behavior problems or substance use) increases suicide risk.

Behavioral Health issues/disorders

* + Depressive disorders
  + Substance abuse or dependence (alcohol and other drugs)
  + Conduct/disruptive behavior disorders
  + Other disorders (e.g., anxiety disorders, personality disorders)
  + Previous suicide attempts
  + Self-injury (without intent to die)
  + Genetic/biological vulnerability (mainly abnormalities in serotonin functioning, which can lead to some of the behavioral health problems listed above)
  + Hopelessness
  + Low self-esteem
  + Loneliness
  + Social alienation and isolation, lack of belonging
  + Low stress and frustration tolerance
  + Impulsivity
  + Risk taking, recklessness
  + Poor problem-solving or coping skills
  + Perception of self as very underweight or very overweight
  + Capacity to self-injure
  + Perception of being a burden (e.g., to family and friends)

Adverse/Stressful Life Circumstances

* + Interpersonal difficulties or losses (e.g., breaking up with a girlfriend or boyfriend)
  + Disciplinary or legal problems
  + Bullying, either as victim or perpetrator
  + School or work problems (e.g., actual or perceived difficulties in school or work, not attending school or work, not going to college)
  + Physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse
  + Chronic physical illness or disability
  + Exposure to suicide of peer Risky Behaviors
  + Alcohol or drug use
  + Delinquency
  + Aggressive/violent behavior
  + Risky sexual behavior

Family Characteristics

* + Family history of suicide or suicidal behavior
  + Parental mental health problems
  + Parental divorce
  + Death of parent or other relative
  + Problems in parent-child relationship (e.g., feelings of detachment from parents, inability to talk with family members, interpersonal conflicts, family financial problems, family violence or abuse, parenting style either under-protective or overprotective and highly critical)

Environmental Factors

* + Negative social and emotional environment at school, including negative attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and interactions of staff and students
  + Lack of acceptance of differences
  + Expression and acts of hostility
  + Lack of respect and fair treatment
  + Lack of respect for the cultures of all students
  + Limitations in school physical environment, including lack of safety and security
  + Weapons on campus
  + Poorly lit areas conducive to bullying and violence
  + Limited access to mental health care
  + Access to lethal means, particularly in the home
  + Exposure to other suicides, leading to suicide contagion

Exposure to stigma and discrimination against students based on sexual orientation; gender identity; race and ethnicity; disability; or physical characteristics, such as overweight. Stigma and discrimination may lead to:

* Victimization and bullying by others
* lack of support from and rejection by family and peers
* dropping out of school
* lack of access to work opportunities and health care
* Internalized homophobia, stress from being different and not accepted, and stress around disclosure of being gay, which can lead to low self-esteem, social isolation, and decreased help-seeking
* Stress due to the need to adapt to a different culture, especially reconciling differences between one’s family and the majority culture, which can lead to family conflict and rejection

**PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR YOUTH SUICIDE**

Protective factors are personal or environmental characteristics that reduce the probability of suicide. Protective factors can buffer the effects of risk factors.

The capacity to cope positively with the effects of risk factors is called “resilience.” Actions by school staff to enhance protective factors are an essential element of a suicide prevention effort. Strengthening these factors also protects students from other risks, including violence, substance abuse, and academic failure.

There is no single, agreed-upon list of protective factors. The list below summarizes the protective factors identified by the most recent research.

Individual Characteristics and Behaviors

* + - Psychological or emotional well-being, positive mood
    - Emotional intelligence: the ability to perceive, integrate into thoughts, understand, and manage one’s emotions
    - Adaptable temperament
    - Internal locus of control
    - Strong problem-solving skills
    - Coping skills, including conflict resolution and nonviolent handling of disputes
    - Positive Self-esteem
    - Frequent, vigorous physical activity or participation in sports
    - Spiritual faith or regular church attendance
    - Cultural and religious beliefs that affirm life and discourage suicide
    - Resilience: ongoing or continuing sense of hope in the face of adversity
    - Frustration tolerance and emotional regulation
    - Body image, care, and protection

Family and Other Social Support

* + - Family support and connectedness to family, closeness to or strong relationship with parents, and parental involvement
    - Close friends or family members, a caring adult, and social support
    - Parental pro-social norms, that is, youth know that parents disapprove of antisocial behavior such as beating someone up or drinking alcohol
    - Family support for school

School

* + - Positive school experiences
    - Part of a close school community
    - Safe environment at school (especially for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth)
    - Adequate or better academic achievement
    - A sense of connectedness to the school
    - A respect for the cultures of all students

Mental Health and Healthcare Providers and Caregivers

* + - Access to effective care for mental, physical, and substance abuse disorders
    - Easy access to care and support through ongoing medical and mental health relationships

Access to Means

* + - Restricted access to firearms: guns locked or unloaded, ammunition stored or locked
    - Safety barriers for bridges, buildings, and other jumping sites
    - Restricted access to medications (over-the-counter and prescriptions)
    - Restricted access to alcohol (since there is an increased risk of suicide by firearms if the victim is drinking at the time)