



Fact sheet 4

Risk and protective factors in suicide prevention

Suicidal behaviours, both fatal and non-fatal, result from interactions between a variety of risk factors and a lack of protective factors across a person's life span.



This fact sheet provides useful information for anyone who wants to understand more about what may lead to suicide.

Defining risk and protective factors

The reasons that people take their own life are very complex. The many factors that influence whether someone is likely to be suicidal are known as:

1. *risk factors*, sometimes called vulnerability factors because they increase the likelihood of suicidal behaviour; and
2. *protective factors*, which reduce the likelihood of suicidal behaviour and work to improve a person's ability to cope with difficult circumstances.

Risk and protective factors are often at opposite ends of the same continuum. For example, social isolation (*risk factor*) and social connectedness (*protective factor*) are both extremes of social support.

Risk and protective factors can occur:

- at the individual or personal level and include mental and physical health, self-esteem, and ability to deal with difficult circumstances, manage emotions, or cope with stress;
- at the social level, which include relationships and involvement with others such as family, friends, workmates, the wider community and the person's sense of belonging; and
- at the contextual level or the broader life environment and this includes the social, political, environmental, cultural and economic factors that contribute to available options and quality of life.

Risk and protective factors may be:

- *modifiable* - things we can change; and
- *non-modifiable* - things we cannot change.

For example, in some areas of Australia there is a high incidence of suicide in isolated older men. Nothing can be done about their age or gender (non-modifiable factors that increase risk), but it is possible to change their geographical location or their social isolation (modifiable factors).



Influencing risk and protective factors

People who attempt to take their own life usually have many risk factors and few protective factors. But risk and protective factors don't explain everything about suicide. Most people with multiple risk factors do not attempt to take their own life, and some who do take their lives have few risk factors and many protective factors.

Particular risk factors are more important for some groups than others. For example, the factors that may put a young man at risk are generally quite different to those that increase the risk for a retired, older man. Applying an understanding of risk factors to prevent suicide involves identifying:

- risk factors (individual, social, contextual) that are present for a particular person or group of people;
- individuals who are most likely to be badly affected by these risk factors, and those who are most likely to be resilient; and
- which of the risk factors can be changed (modifiable) to reduce the level of risk.

That there is not a straight one to one relationship between reduced risk and the presence of protective and/or risk factors may be for a number of reasons:

- The same life event can have very different effects on individuals, depending on what else is happening in a person's life at the time and their ability to grow and learn from life's challenges. To assist someone who is feeling suicidal it is critical to understand their sense of self, their ability to cope, and their personal competence.
- People also vary widely in their beliefs about what makes life worth living, and these views may also change over time. Despite many years of research, researchers have not yet been able to explain how and why these differences occur.
- A further challenge lies in the strong relationship between socio-economic factors and health. At present in Australia, there is a strong link between geographic location (regional, rural and remote), socio-economic disadvantage (low socio-economic status) and ill health. This relationship also exists for suicide – suicide rates tend to be much higher in regional, rural and remote locations and in areas of higher socio-economic disadvantage.

Applying our knowledge of risk and protective factors in suicide prevention

The most recent research suggests that an understanding of risk factors in suicide is best used to identify populations or specific groups that might be at risk, rather than attempting to identify individuals at risk. The main reason is that the majority of people who can be categorised as at risk do not and will not ever take their own life. It is extremely difficult to determine from risk factors alone which individuals within an at risk group are more or less likely to become suicidal.

Most researchers recommend that suicide prevention initiatives should focus on constellations of risk and protective factors. Activities may include:

- reducing exposure to social and contextual risk through structural changes that target specific at risk groups such as remote Indigenous communities, socially or geographically isolated older men or people with a mental illness. For example, developing social support networks, improved employment prospects or access to affordable housing;
- increasing individual protective factors through activities that help to build self-esteem, psychological strength and personal competence. For example, teaching young people social and emotional skills, fostering positive relationships with peers, teachers and other adults, and encouraging help-seeking behaviours;
- providing easier access to appropriate care and support that is in the right place, at the right time, using the right approach. For example, non-judgmental assistance for people bereaved by suicide, provided by their peers, in the places they frequent and where they feel most comfortable; and
- reducing risk and increasing protection for people who are in current crisis. Such groups might include those who have attempted to take their own life, or who have been recently discharged from mental health care.

More information

- Beautrais AL (1998). *Risk factors for suicide and attempted suicide amongst young people*. National Health and Medical Research Council: Canberra.
- Hawton K, van Heeringen K (2000). *The International Handbook of Suicide and Attempted Suicide*. John Wiley and Sons: Chichester.
- *Living Is For Everyone (LIFE) – A Framework for Prevention of Suicide in Australia* (2007). Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing: Canberra.
- *Living Is For Everyone (LIFE) – Research and Evidence in Suicide Prevention* (2007). Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing: Canberra.
- Mental health & well being – information on the Australian Government's role and contributions to mental health reform activities in Australia: www.mentalhealth.gov.au
- The Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention (WA) – suicide prevention information for professionals researchers and community members: www.mcsp.org.au
- New Zealand Ministry of Health – Suicide Prevention – A review of evidence of risk and protective factors, and points of effective intervention: www.moh.govt.nz
- Suicide Prevention Resource Centre – provides prevention support, training, and resources to assist organisations and individuals to develop suicide prevention programs, interventions and policies: www.sprc.org