Youth Suicide Risk and Protective Factors: Implications for Prevention

BEYOND THE BASICS
CONFERENCE - MAINE

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Introduction
CHOICE A QUESTION:
WHAT DO YOU WANT TO KNOW ABOUT RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS?

WHAT DO YOU HATE ABOUT RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS?

HOW HAVE YOU USED RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS?
Purpose

• **Increase knowledge about risk and protective factors**

• **Increase understanding how they can be used**
Outline

- Define, describe, and list risk and protective factors
- Distinguish from warning signs
- Describe their uses and give examples of how they can be used
Risk Factors - Definition

- Risk factors indicate someone is at heightened risk for suicide
- Risk factors are based on an association for a particular group
- Could be only an association, or a cause, or a contributing factor

Rodgers, P., 2010
Risk Factors for Youth Suicide

- Mental illness including substance-related disorder
- Prior suicide attempt
- Self injury
- Parental/familial problems
- Family history of suicidal behavior
- Poor coping skills
- Social/interpersonal isolation/alienation
- Contagion
- Means availability
Features of Risk Factors

- Major or minor
- Modifiable or not
- Synergistic
- Idiosyncratic
- Dynamic
- Cross-cutting or culturally unique
Risk Factors – Common themes

- Negative life events and stressors
- MI and certain personality attributes
- Isolation and alienation
- Hopelessness, pessimism, etc.

Method

Berman et al., 2006, *Adolescent Suicide*
What’s Wrong with Risk Factors

- May not be the cause
- Not predictive
- Sloppy
- Not feasible to apply?
- Fit the group they were found for
Protective Factors for Youth Suicide

- Psychological or emotional well-being
- Self esteem
- Academic achievement
- Connectedness, support, communication with parents
- Family connectedness
- Social support
- Coping skills
- Frequent, vigorous physical activity, sports
- Safe school, connectedness
- Caring adult
- Reduced access to alcohol, firearms, medications
Protective Factors for Youth Suicide

- Personal control – confidence in cope-ability; life satisfaction
- Internal constraints – hope, religiosity, spirituality
- External constraints – family, environment
- Connections to support – help receptivity, positive communication
- Frustration and distress tolerance
Suicide Risk Factors and Triggering Events

**Biological Factors**
- Familial Risk
- Serotonergic Function
- Neurochemical Regulators
- Demographics
- Pathophysiology

**Predisposing Factors**
- Major Psychiatric Syndromes
- Substance Use/Abuse
- Personality Profile
- Abuse Syndromes
- Severe Medical/Neurological Illness

**Proximal Factors**
- Hopelessness
- Intoxication
- Impulsiveness Aggressiveness
- Negative Expectancy
- Severe Chronic Pain

**Triggering Events**
- Public Humiliation Shame
- Access To Weapons
- Severe Defeat
- Major Loss
- Worsening Prognosis

David J. Knesper, University of Michigan
BP Warning Signs for Suicide Prevention (1)

Someone at critical risk of suicide if he or she:

- Threatens to hurt or kill him or herself, or talks of wanting to hurt or kill him or herself; and/or,
- Looks for ways to kill him or herself by seeking access to firearms, pills, or other means; and/or,
- Talks or writes about death, dying or suicide, when these actions are out of the ordinary.

Get help *immediately* from a mental health professional or a hospital emergency department, or call 911.
BP Warning Signs for Suicide Prevention (2)

- Feelings of hopelessness
- Anxiety, agitation, trouble sleeping or sleeping all the time
- Expressions of no reason for living; no purpose in life
- Feelings of being trapped - like there's no way out
- Increased alcohol and/or drug use
- Withdrawal from friends, family, and community
- Rage, uncontrolled anger, expressions of revenge
- Reckless behavior or more risky activities,
- Dramatic mood changes

Get help by contacting a mental health professional or calling the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).
Risk and Protective Factors - Uses

Treatment
- Clinical risk assessment of patients
- Training – youth caretakers know what to track and report

Intervention
- Program planning – groups and factors to target
Targeting Risk Groups for Youth Suicide

- LGB for attempts
- Youth in foster care
- Youth with mental illness or substance use disorder
- Demographics: White male young adults, Native American males, poverty, rural
- Youth in juvenile justice system
- Runaway and homeless youth
- Bullied youth and bullies
- Youth who have attempted suicide
Targeting Risk Factors for LGBT youth

- Gender nonconformity
- Internal conflict about sexual orientation
- Time of coming out
- Early coming out
- Low family connectedness
- Lack of adult caring
- Unsafe school
- Family rejection
- Victimization
- Stigma and discrimination
Protective Factor – LGBT youth

• Family acceptance – parents and caregivers can help:
  o Talk with your child about his/her LGBT identity
  o Express affection when you learn that your child is LGBT
  o Advocate for your child when he/she is mistreated because of his/her LGBT identity
  o Bring your child to LGBT events
  o Connect your child with an LGBT adult role model
  o Welcome your child’s LGBT friends and partners into your home
  o Believe that your LGBT child can have a happy future

Adapted from Caitlin Ryan, 2009.

Source: SPRC’s Workshop Suicide Prevention among LGBT Youth
Suicidal behavior among youth in foster care

- Youth in foster care are 3 to 5 times more likely to die by suicide (Farand, 2004; Thompson, 1995).
- Adolescents who had been in FC are four times more likely to have attempted suicide last year (Pilowsky & Wu, 2006).
- Adolescents who had been in FC were nearly two and half times more likely to have seriously considered attempting suicide (Pilowsky & Wu, 2006).
Risk factors for suicidal behavior

- Mental illness including substance abuse
- Prior suicide attempt
- Abuse and neglect
- Trauma
- Parental mental illness and substance abuse
- Familial discord and dysfunction
- Family history of suicidal behavior
- Social/interpersonal isolation/alienation
- Exposure to suicides and attempts
- Violence and victimization
- Poor coping skills
- Bullying
- Suicide means availability/firearm in household
- Self injury
Targeting depression early

- 40% of 13- to 17-year-olds had any mental disorder in the last year
- Over half had any mental disorder in their lifetime

*Source: Kessler et al. (2011). Arch Gen Psychiatry*

- Most adult mental illnesses begin in childhood or adolescence
- New approaches work with youth when they first have symptoms of depression.
Summary

You can now

- Define, describe, and list risk and protective factors
- Distinguish from warning signs
- Describe their uses and start to plan to use them
References and Resources

Best Practice Warning Signs of Suicide at
http://www.suicidology.org/stats-and-tools/suicide-warning-signs

Rodgers, P., November 5, 2010, unpublished presentation

SPRC & Rodgers, P., 2011, Understanding Risk and Protective Factors