

SUICIDE ASSESSMENT: WHY DO IT and HOW TO DO IT WELL

Formally assess suicide at every initial evaluation, and as clinically indicated in follow-up contacts.

Why assess suicide with everyone?

- Empirically based risk assessment
- Liability issues
- Even if you do not believe that a client is at risk for suicide, ask to rule out the possibility.
- "I didn't ask about suicide. I just had a good feeling about it and didn't believe that he was at risk" is not the standard of care.

How to ask without offending or raising defenses?

- Use hierarchical questioning, so that you normalize suicidal thoughts.

"You mentioned that you've been feeling depressed [anxious, agitated, etc.], and it's not unusual to feel very down and hopeless. Have you been feeling hopeless?" [Then say] "People who feel hopeless sometimes find themselves thinking about death. What has your experience been?" [If yes, then say] "When you're feeling depressed and hopeless, it's not unusual for people to contemplate suicide. What has your experience been?"

- If rapport has been firmly established, direct questioning may be best.
- Most clients are not offended by the question.
- If you're having trouble asking about suicide, it may be important to look within to determine what is getting in the way.

General Process Tips

- Engage with clients
- Listen well
- Watch for discrepancies in client's statements/behavior. Do not be afraid to point them out or ask for clarification.
- Look them in the eye when you ask about suicide.
- Be straightforward with terminology—don't use euphemisms. Pick 1-2 terms and stick with them.
- Ask very specific questions—when, where, with what method.
- Acknowledge resistance—clients may not be ready to give up their suicidal thoughts.
- Make it collaborative—if a crisis plan or commitment to living plan is used, use "we" instead of "you" to promote collaboration and trust.
- Consider writing the plan in your handwriting and giving it to client as transitional object. Be sure both of you sign it and make photocopy for the file.