



Risk and Protective Factors

To help lower the risk of suicide, this fact sheet has been developed to help you understand the risk factors associated with higher rates of suicide. Understanding risk factors, as well as warning signs, may help alert you to a possible suicide attempt. This fact sheet is designed for those who interact frequently with service members – such as a family member, friend, military leader, commanding officer, or chaplain.

While there is no known “cause” for suicide, research has shown that there are certain factors that increase the risk for suicide. These are called “risk factors.” Certain risk factors are chronic in that they affect risk over a person’s lifetime, e.g. history of physical abuse. Certain other risk factors are acute in that they affect risk in the near term, e.g. recent divorce.

Risk factors include:

- Male gender
- Caucasian race
- E-01 to E-02 rank
- Younger than 25 years of age
- GED/less than a high school education
- Divorced
- Regular component¹
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Relationship problems
- Legal, administrative, and financial problems

Acute risk warning signs include:

- Threatening to hurt or kill him or herself, or talking of wanting to hurt or kill him/herself
- Looking for ways to kill him/herself by seeking access to firearms, available pills, or other means
- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide, when these actions are out of the ordinary

Other warning signs include:

- Increased substance (alcohol or drug) use
- No reason for living

- No sense of purpose in life
- Anxiety, agitation, unable to sleep or sleeping all the time
- Feeling trapped – like there’s no way out
- Hopelessness
- Withdrawal from friends, family and society
- Rage, uncontrolled anger, seeking revenge
- Acting reckless or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking
- Dramatic mood changes²

It is also helpful to understand protective factors. Protective factors can decrease the risk of suicide. Enhancing or reinforcing protective factors can help make a person safer such as restricting access to lethal means or reinforcing cultural beliefs. While it is not known whether there are specific protective factors that reduce the risk for suicide specifically among active service members, the following factors have been shown to be protective in the general population:³

- Strong connections to family and other supports
- Access to effective clinical interventions
- Restricted access to lethal means
- Skills in problem-solving and conflict resolution
- Frustration tolerance and ability to regulate emotions
- Positive beliefs about future, ability to cope, and life in general
- Cultural or religious beliefs discouraging suicide

You are not alone. Visit the Defense Centers of Excellence (DCoE) Outreach Center at www.dcoe.health.mil or contact them directly at 866-966-1020 or resources@dcoeoutreach.org

¹ Includes active duty in the Departments of the Army, Navy Air Force and Marines

² American Association of Suicidology

³ Suicide Prevention Resource Center