

Risk Factors for Suicide

Risk factors for suicide are characteristics or conditions that increase the chance that a person may try to take her or his life. Suicide risk tends to be highest when someone has several risk factors at the same time.

The most frequently cited risk factors for suicide are:

Mental disorders, in particular:

Depression or bipolar (manic-depressive) disorder

Alcohol or substance abuse or dependence

Schizophrenia

Borderline or antisocial personality disorder

Conduct disorder (in youth)

Psychotic disorders; psychotic symptoms in the context of any disorder

Anxiety disorders

Impulsivity and aggression, especially in the context of the above mental disorders

Previous suicide attempt

Family history of attempted or completed suicide

Serious medical condition and/or pain

It is important to bear in mind that the large majority of people with mental disorders or other suicide risk factors do not engage in suicidal behavior.

Environmental Factors That Increase Suicide Risk

Some people who have one or more of the major risk factors above can become suicidal in the face of factors in their environment, such as:

A highly stressful life event such as losing someone close, financial loss, or trouble with the law

Prolonged stress due to adversities such as unemployment, serious relationship conflict, harassment or bullying

Exposure to another person's suicide, or to graphic or sensationalized accounts of suicide (contagion)

Access to lethal methods of suicide during a time of increased risk

Again, though, it is important to remember that these factors do not usually increase suicide risk for people who are not already vulnerable because of a preexisting mental disorder or other major risk factors. Exposure to extreme or prolonged environmental stress, however, can lead to depression, anxiety, and other disorders that in turn, can increase risk for suicide.