

Clients Who Need Lethal Means Counseling

For a list of some trainings on suicide-specific topics, such as assessing and managing suicide risk, see [Suicide Care Training Options](#) at the [Zero Suicide](#) website.

Clients at Risk

Three types of clients may be at risk of suicide and can benefit from counseling on access to lethal means:

- Individuals who **currently** have suicidal thoughts
- Clients **in distress** who have **attempted suicide in the past**
- Those who are struggling with mental health or substance misuse issues, especially if they are **also coping with painful life crises** (e.g., relationship breakups, legal problems, financial crises, housing dislocation, job loss)

Talk About Suicide

Talking about suicide is the best way to determine if someone currently has suicidal thoughts or has attempted suicide in the past.

Research has found no evidence that raising the topic of suicide creates or increases the risk of suicide.

Ask Direct Questions

The ability to calmly, compassionately, and matter-of-factly explore suicidal thoughts and behaviors with others may encourage them to disclose suicidality, if it exists. Often, clients who have considered suicide will be relieved that you raised the subject. Here is some guidance:

- Use direct questions about current or past suicidal thoughts and behavior.
- Let the client know that other people have similar thoughts and feelings.

Get Specific Information

If your conversation with your client results in disclosure of past suicidal thoughts or behaviors, probe more about current suicidal feelings. Find out specific details about their suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Here is some sample language:

- “Tell me about a couple of times in the past few months when things were the worst for you—did you think about suicide?”
 - *If yes, then ask:* “Did you take any specific steps toward an attempt? What methods did you think about? What kept you alive?”

- “Tell me about the last couple of days—how much would you say suicide has been on your mind, if at all?”
 - *If so, then ask:* “Are there specific methods you’ve thought about?”
- “Have you thought about how you’d kill yourself?”
 - *If yes, then ask:* “Have you thought about when or where you’d kill yourself?”
 - *If they mention a specific method of suicide, then ask:* “What other methods are you thinking about?”
- “Is there a specific scenario where you think you would attempt suicide?”
- “Have you ever attempted suicide in the past, or started to?”

Don’t Rely Solely on Disclosure

Suicidal crises are unpredictable and episodic, so just asking about suicidal thoughts is not enough. For example, someone who struggles with depression and binge drinking may not currently be suicidal, but may become suicidal if faced with a relationship breakup or drunk driving arrest.

Therefore, any client at risk could benefit from lethal means counseling. This includes individuals who struggle with mental health and/or substance use issues. Clients who are experiencing a major crisis, stress, or trauma are also at risk of suicide and should receive lethal means counseling.

Considerations

An acute suicidal crisis is when a person transitions from being at risk for suicide, or considering suicide, to being ready to actually make an attempt.

Suicidal crises can escalate rapidly, may lead to an unplanned attempt, are often brief, and can be difficult to predict. Therefore, lethal means counseling should take place *before* a suicidal crisis occurs.