

A Strategic Planning Approach to Suicide Prevention: An Overview

When a suicide occurs, it is natural to want to start any program or campaign that might prevent additional suicides and address the pain as soon as possible. Yet we know that suicide prevention activities and programs are most effective when they are strategically selected, implemented, and evaluated. Whether you are starting a new program or assessing your progress midway through a project, a strategic planning approach is useful.

A strategic planning approach can help:

- Determine specific problems, populations, and settings to focus on
- Identify activities that will be effective in preventing suicide
- Prioritize efforts among the various possibilities to have the greatest impact

Strategic planning has six steps:

Step 1: Describe the problem and its context

Step 2: Choose long-term goals

Step 3. Identify key risk and protective factors

Step 4. Select or develop interventions

Step 5. Plan the evaluation

Step 6. Implement, evaluate, and improve

Although these steps are listed in the order they are generally carried out, you can also move back and forth between them as needed. For example, you might want to revise your long-term goals after identifying the key risk and protective factors. In fact, it can be very helpful to review your goals as you move through each of the steps. You can adapt each step to fit your needs.

1: Describe the Problem and Its Context

A clear understanding of the problem of suicide you're trying to address will provide a solid foundation from which to choose or develop appropriate and effective suicide prevention activities. The information you collect to better understand and describe the problem can also be used to gain community and institutional support for your prevention efforts.

To determine the most effective prevention activities, gather information about the following:

- The characteristics of people who are dying by suicide, attempting suicide, or experiencing suicidal ideation
- The means (methods) that people use to harm themselves
- The risk factors that contribute to suicidal behaviors
- The community resources that are used to identify and assist people at risk of suicide and promote mental health and well-being

There are three main ways of gathering information on suicide:

- Looking at data on suicide
- Reviewing research on suicidal behaviors and how to prevent them
- Talking with people in the community

Step 2: Choose Long-Term Goals

Long-term goals in suicide prevention focus on reducing suicidal behaviors in a specific group of people, associated with a specific risk factor, or in a specific circumstance or setting. They help clarify what you want to achieve and which activities are likely to get you there.

Long-term goals are the most effective if they are based on the data and information gathered about the problem and its context. Use the following criteria to choose your goals:

- Severity – How dangerous is the problem?
- Extent – How widespread is the problem?
- Disparity – Does the problem represent a health disparity?
- Capacity – Are there resources that can be directed at the problem?
- Understanding – Do you know enough about the problem to take effective action?

Step 3: Identify Key Risk and Protective Factors

Risk factors are characteristics of people or environments that are associated with an **increase** in a health-related condition, such as suicidal behavior. Protective factors are characteristics of people or environments that **reduce** the effect of risk factors, and thus protect people from risk. So, if you reduce risk factors for suicide and increase the protective factors, individuals are less likely to have suicidal thoughts, attempt suicide, or die by suicide. Focusing prevention efforts on risk and protective factors will help reduce the suicidal behaviors described in your long-term goals.

Since it's difficult to address all of the risk and protective factors for suicide, identify the **specific** risk and protective factors that are the **most likely to reduce** suicide deaths and attempts and suicidal thoughts in the populations you are trying to reach. To find articles that summarize the research on risk and protective factors, check resources such as the [SPRC website](#), [PubMed](#), and [Google Scholar](#).

Step 4. Select or Develop Interventions

An intervention is an activity or set of activities designed to decrease risk factors and/or increase protective factors. Examples of suicide prevention interventions include gatekeeper training, safe storage of lethal means, and safety planning. Not all interventions will target the risk and protective factors you selected and consequently address your long-term goals. So, you will need to carefully consider which ones will work for your situation.

Once you have confirmed that an intervention is appropriate, create an action plan. An action plan is a step-by-step description of what must be done to implement the activities and usually includes the following:

- A list of tasks and subtasks in the order in which they must be completed
- Timelines and completion dates for each task
- Who has primary responsibility for overseeing each task

It is also useful to include objectives for each activity, who else will be involved in and informed about each task, and what resources will be needed. For more information on developing objectives, see the course handout *Developing Goals and Objectives*.

Step 5: Plan the Evaluation

An evaluation is valuable because it can show the outcome of your activities. It can also help you make any changes needed to improve your intervention so that you have a greater chance of achieving your long-term goals.

Prepare for the evaluation before an intervention is implemented. That way you can include the evaluation in your action plan to ensure that it is carried out at the most effective time.

An evaluation plan details the following:

- How you will monitor progress with the implementation of your activities to identify and solve any problems that occurred
- How you will know if your interventions are making the desired changes in risk and protective factors, which will enable you to achieve your long-term goals
- What data you need to collect and the logistics of collecting it
- How the data will be analyzed and the results reported to stakeholders

Step 6: Implement, Evaluate, and Improve

Implement your activities. Then evaluate them and use your evaluation data to monitor implementation, solve problems, and improve your prevention efforts.

Conducting an evaluation gives you the opportunity to answer key questions:

- Were the activities implemented as planned?
- Did the activities have the anticipated results?
- Did the activities help decrease risk factors and increase protective factors?

These questions can be answered by checking with the people who carried out the tasks and looking at the data on the results. Then you can see where there may be problems and explore ways to improve, and possibly expand, your activities so you are more likely to achieve your long-term goals.