

QuickLits: Risk and Protective Factors – Predicting Risk and Resilience

Risk and Protective Factors

Risk and protective factors are conditions, situations and characteristics that have been associated with risk for suicidal behavior. Risk and protective factors are influenced at multiple levels: individual, interpersonal, institutional, community and society. Knowing these factors can help campus professionals to reduce risk and target prevention efforts appropriately, as well as encourage positive mental health in students (SPRC, 2003).

Risk Factors

Risk factors are circumstances associated with risk of suicide. Commonly identified risk factors include:

- untreated or under-treated mental illness
- alcohol and drug use/abuse
- previous suicide attempt
- hopelessness
- impulsivity or aggressiveness
- barriers to effective clinical care
- isolation or lack of social support
- unsupported financial/social loss
- stigma associated with seeking care
- access to lethal means
- exposure to media that normalizes/glamorizes suicide (SPRC, 2003)

Protective Factors

Protective factors are associated with decreased risk for suicide risk. Commonly identified protective factors are:

- strong connections to family & other support systems
- access to clinical interventions
- restricted access to lethal means
- skills in problem solving & conflict resolution
- ability to regulate emotions
- positive beliefs about future, ability to cope & life in general
- cultural or religious beliefs discouraging suicide (SPRC, 2003)

Air Force Model

The United States Air Force (USAF) developed a population-based strategy called the Suicide Prevention Program to decrease risk factors and promote protective factors associated with suicide. The USAF program identifies 11 initiatives that work together to target strengthening social support, promoting development of effective coping skills, and changing policies and norms so that individuals will develop appropriate help-seeking behaviors. One study of the USAF model showed a 33% reduction in risk of suicide relative to the studied population (Knox et al, 2003).

The SPRC advocates using a comprehensive approach to suicide prevention that parallels the USAF model. The “Model for Comprehensive Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Promotion” includes seven areas:

- identify students at risk
- increase help-seeking behavior
- provide mental health services
- follow crisis management procedures
- restrict access to potentially lethal means
- develop life skills
- promote social networks

These seven areas are geared to help campuses to decrease risk factors and increase protective factors in the lives of students (SPRC, n.d.).

Knox, K. L., Litts, D. A., Talcott, G. W., Feig, J. C., & Caine, E. D. (2003). Risk of suicide and related adverse outcomes after exposure to a suicide prevention programme in the US Air Force: Cohort study. *BJM Publishing Group Limited*. Doi: 10.1136/bmj.327.7428.1376.

Suicide Prevention and Resource Center. (2003). Campus data: Risk and protective factors. Retrieved November 17, 2009 from <http://www2.sprc.org/collegesanduniversities/campus-data-risk-and-protective-factors>

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