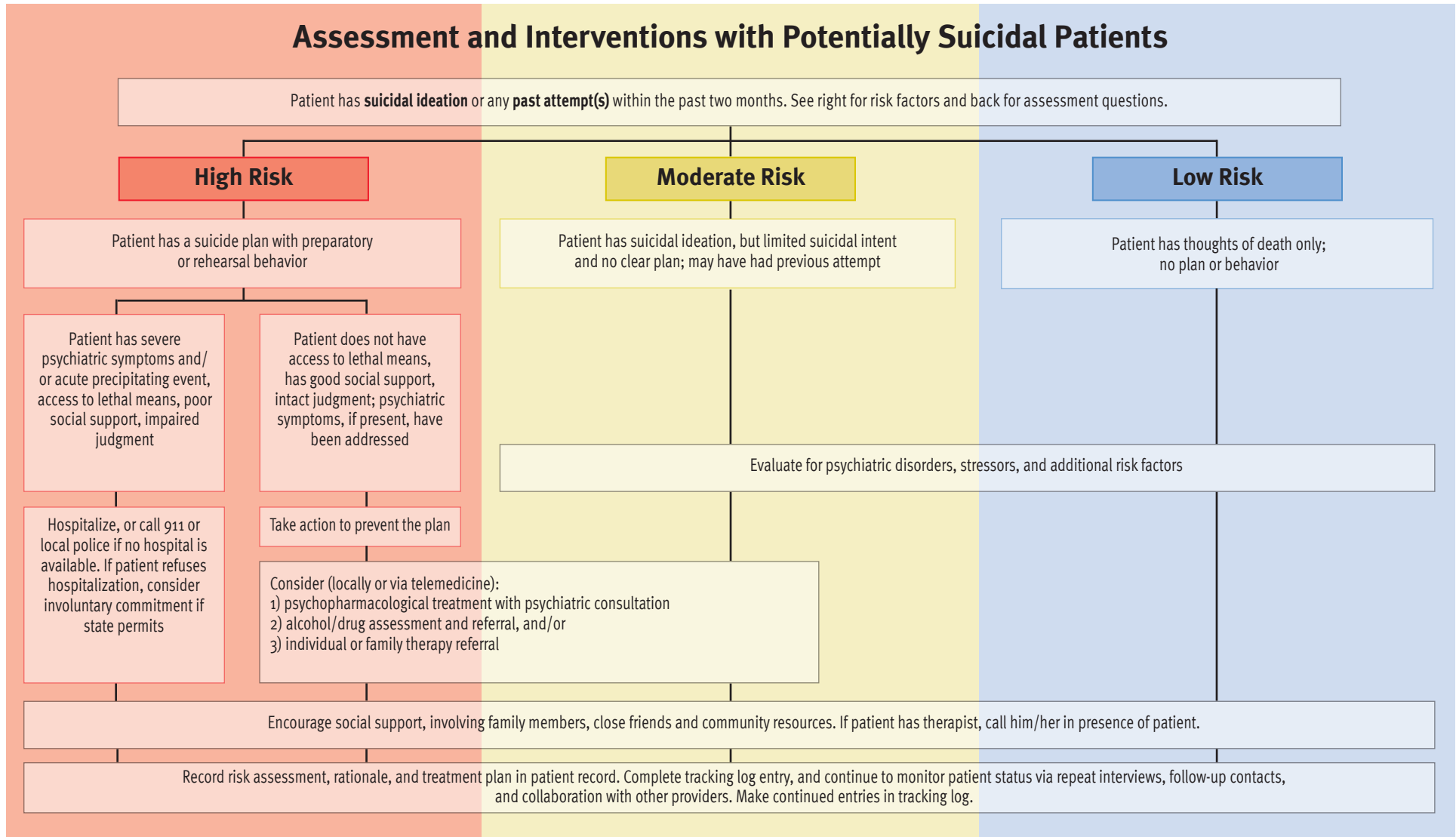


# Assessment and Interventions with Potentially Suicidal Patients

## A Guide for Primary Care Professionals



# Suicide Risk and Protective Factors<sup>1</sup>

## RISK FACTORS

- ▶ **Suicidal behavior:** history of prior suicide attempts, aborted suicide attempts or self-injurious behavior.
- ▶ **Family history:** of suicide, attempts, or psychiatric diagnoses, especially those requiring hospitalization.
- ▶ **Current/past psychiatric disorders:** especially mood disorders (e.g., depression, Bipolar disorder), psychotic disorders, alcohol/substance abuse, TBI, PTSD, personality disorders (e.g., Borderline PD).

*Co-morbidity with other psychiatric and/or substance abuse disorders and recent onset of illness increase risk.*

- ▶ **Key symptoms:** anhedonia, impulsivity, hopelessness, anxiety/panic, insomnia, command hallucinations, intoxication. For children and adolescents: oppositionality and conduct problems.
- ▶ **Precipitants/stressors:** triggering events leading to humiliation, shame or despair (i.e., loss of relationship, financial, or health status – real or anticipated).
- ▶ **Chronic medical illness** (esp. CNS disorders, pain).
- ▶ **History of or current abuse or neglect.**

## PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Protective factors, even if present, may not counteract significant acute risk.

- ▶ **Internal:** ability to cope with stress, religious beliefs, frustration tolerance.
- ▶ **External:** responsibility to children or pets, positive therapeutic relationships, social supports.

## Screening: uncovering suicidality<sup>2</sup>

- ▶ Other people with similar problems sometimes lose hope; have you?
- ▶ With this much stress, have you thought [are you thinking] of hurting yourself?
- ▶ Have you ever thought [are you thinking] about killing yourself?
- ▶ Have you ever tried to kill yourself or attempted suicide?

## Assess suicide ideation and plans<sup>3</sup>

- ▶ Assess suicidal ideation – frequency, duration, and intensity
  - When did you begin having suicidal thoughts?
  - Did any event (stressor) precipitate the suicidal thoughts?
  - How often do you have thoughts of suicide? How long do they last?
  - How strong are the thoughts of suicide?
  - What is the worst they have ever been?
  - What do you do when you have suicidal thoughts?
  - What did you do when they were the strongest ever?
- ▶ Assess suicide plans
  - Do you have a plan or have you been planning to end your life? If so, how would you do it? Where would you do it?
  - Do you have the (drugs, gun, rope) that you would use? Where is it right now?
  - Do you have a timeline in mind for ending your life? Is there something (an event) that would trigger the plan?

## Assess suicide intent

- ▶ What would it accomplish if you were to end your life?
- ▶ Do you feel as if you're a burden to others?
- ▶ How confident are you that your plan would actually end your life?
- ▶ What have you done to begin to carry out the plan? For instance, have you rehearsed what you would do (e.g., held pills or gun, tied the rope)?
- ▶ Have you made other preparations (e.g., updated life insurance, made arrangements for pets)?
- ▶ What makes you feel better (e.g., contact with family, use of substances)?
- ▶ What makes you feel worse (e.g., being alone, thinking about a situation)?
- ▶ How likely do you think you are to carry out your plan?
- ▶ What stops you from killing yourself?

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> SAFE-T pocket card. Suicide Prevention Resource Center & Mental Health Screening. (n/d).

<sup>2</sup> Stovall, J., & Domino, F.J. Approaching the suicidal patient. *American Family Physician*, 68 (2003), 1814-1818.

<sup>3</sup> Gliatto, M.F., & Rai, K.A. Evaluation and treatment of patients with suicidal ideation. *American Family Physician*, 59 (1999), 1500-1506.

*Development of this pocket guide was supported by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), Public Health Services, Grant Award, U1CRH03713*



Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education  
3035 Center Green Drive, Suite 200 Boulder, CO 80301-2204  
303.541.0200 (ph) 303.541.0291 (fax)  
[www.wiche.edu/mentalhealth/](http://www.wiche.edu/mentalhealth/)

Copyright 2011 by Education Development Center, Inc., and the WICHE Mental Health Program. All rights reserved.