

Safety Plan Guidelines

School mental health professionals can follow these guidelines to create safety plans for students.

What is a safety plan?

A safety plan is a prioritized list of coping strategies and sources of support for students who are at high risk for suicide. Students can use these strategies before or during a suicidal crisis. The plan is **brief**, in the **student's own words**, and **easy to read**.

Who should have a safety plan?

Any student who has a suicidal crisis should have a comprehensive suicide risk assessment. Mental health professionals should then collaborate with the student on developing a safety plan.

Questions to ask the student

1. Warning signs

- Ask: *What do you experience when you start to think about suicide or feel extremely depressed?*
- Ask: *How will you know when the safety plan should be used?*
- List warning signs (thoughts, images, thinking processes, mood, and/or behaviors) using the student's own words.

2. Internal coping strategies

- Ask: *What can you do, on your own, if you become suicidal again, to help yourself not to act on your thoughts or urges?*
- Ask: *Would you be likely to do this step during a time of crisis?*
- If doubt of use is expressed, ask: *What might stand in the way of you thinking of these activities or doing them if you think of them?*
- Use a collaborative, problem-solving approach to address potential barriers and identify alternative coping strategies.

3. Social contacts who may distract from the crisis

- Discuss this step with students who are not sure that the strategies from Step 2 will resolve the crisis or lower risk. The goal of this step is to distract the student from suicidal thoughts and feelings.
- Ask: *Who or what social settings help you take your mind off your problems, at least for a little while? Who helps you feel better when you're with them?*
- Ask for safe places they can go to be around people (e.g., a coffee shop).
- Ask the student to list several people and social settings in case the first option is unavailable.
- Assess the likelihood that the student will engage in this step. Identify potential obstacles and then problem solve as appropriate.

4. Family members or friends who may offer help

- Instruct the student to use this step if Step 3 does not resolve the crisis or lower risk.
- Ask: *Among your family or friends, who could you contact for help during a crisis? Who is supportive of you? Who can you talk with when you're stressed or struggling?*
- Ask the student to list several people in case one is unavailable. Prioritize the list.
- Assess the likelihood that the student will engage in this step. Identify potential obstacles and then problem solve as appropriate.
- Role play and rehearsal can be very useful in this step.

5. Professionals and agencies to contact for help

- Instruct the student to use this step if Step 4 does not resolve the crisis or lower risk.
- Ask: *Are there mental health professionals (school counselors, therapists, social workers) we should identify for your safety plan? Are there other health care providers you'd suggest?*
- List names, numbers, emails, and locations of mental health providers and local urgent care services.
- Assess the likelihood that the student will engage in this step. Identify potential obstacles and then problem solve as appropriate.
- Role play and rehearsal can be very useful in this step.

6. Making the environment safe

- Ask the student which means they would consider using during a suicidal crisis.
- Ask: *Do you or someone in your household own a firearm, such as a gun or rifle? What other means do you have access to that you may use to attempt to kill yourself?*
- Collaboratively identify ways to increase safety by limiting access to lethal means. Ask: *How can we develop a plan to increase your safety by limiting your access to these means?*
- For methods with low lethality, you may ask the student to remove or limit their access to these methods themselves.
- Restricting the student's access to a highly lethal method, such as a firearm, should be done by a designated, responsible person (usually a family member, close friend, or a member of law enforcement).

After the plan has been developed

- Assess the likelihood that the safety plan will be used and problem solve with the student to identify barriers to using the plan.
- Discuss where the student will keep the safety plan and how it will be located in a crisis.
- Evaluate if the format is appropriate for the student's capacity and circumstances.
- Review the plan periodically when the student's circumstances or needs change.

Visit **supportivetogether.org** for more resources related to safety plans and supportive interventions.

Sources: Suicide Prevention Resource Center
(<https://sprc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/SafetyPlanningGuide-Quick-Guide-for-Clinicians.pdf>).