

## **Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) and Suicidal Behavior**

FASD is a broad term for a range of effects that occur when a fetus is exposed to alcohol. It creates a lifelong disability. Effects vary but can include neurological, developmental, intellectual, behavioral, and learning disabilities as well as physical malformations. (See [www.nofas.org](http://www.nofas.org) for more information.)

FASD affects up to 5% of the US population, but often goes unrecognized. Those with FASD cope with serious cognitive deficits and face many social, educational, and vocational challenges. This group bears the same, if not higher, risk of suicide as the general population.

Suicidal behavior has not been well-researched in persons with FASD, but it has been documented. Here are some factors that bear on suicidality among persons with FASD:

**Capability** – Intellectual disability is not a buffer against the onset of risk and suicidal behavior. A person with FASD may experience suicidal thoughts, develop a strong intent to die, and devise a means of taking her or his life. Even a very basic plan can prove to be fatal.

**Ability** – Experiences such as of abuse, bullying, other forms of victimization, and self-injury are common in youths and adults with FASD. These experiences can inure them to pain, and lower their resistance to potential self-harm up to and including suicide.

**Executive Functioning** - Deficits in this area may make it difficult to see and weigh multiple options as possible solutions to a problem. The ability to see beyond the present may be compromised with FASD.

**Emotionality** - The intensity of emotion experienced by individuals with FASD can be extreme. Once a strong emotion has been unleashed, unregulated impulsivity and an inability to plan ahead, can make a simple cry for help into a potentially life-threatening situation.

**Under-Identification** - Lack of understanding of FASD in the social service, criminal justice, and mental health systems can lead to overlooking risk factors and warning signs. A better understanding and awareness of FASD must be achieved across all systems.

**Treatment Challenges** - FASD often inhibits an individual's ability to assimilate new coping skills and transfer them to other everyday situations. These problems necessitate a more practical, comprehensive, and multimodal approach to treatment.

**Behavioral Health Issues** – Adults with FASD may be at increased risk of alcohol abuse and psychiatric disorders. Adolescents may be at greater risk of developing substance abuse problems. These factors affect quality of life and add to suicide risk.

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