

## Trauma and Suicide Risk

Trauma is a reaction to a harmful or life-threatening occurrence that is outside the range of normal experience and beyond control. Those with histories of trauma may be troubled by thoughts of suicide. Trauma's impact is insidious, pervasive, life changing, and enduring. It influences responses to future stressors.

### *What are some examples of traumatic events or experiences?*

Trauma can result from victimization and severe psychological abuse, physical assault, (e.g., rape, incest, molestation, domestic abuse), bodily injury, exposure to homicide, suicide, and other fatalities, surgery, serious accidents, and devastating interpersonal losses, as well as disasters (fires, earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, etc.).

### *What are consequences of trauma that may increase suicide risk?*

The effects of trauma may include anxiety, depression, hopelessness, despair, anger, hostility, social isolation, impulsiveness, alcohol or substance abuse, self-destructive behavior, humiliation, shame, guilt, lessened self-esteem, a loss of personal beliefs, and feeling ineffective, distrustful, or threatened.

### *How do these trauma-linked feelings and behaviors relate to suicide?*

A significant number of suicide attempters have a background of trauma. It makes those affected feel less connected or that they are burdens to their families and friends. This generates hopelessness and depression, which may produce a desire to die. Trauma also weakens resistance to serious self-harm.

### *What are other suicide risk factors that may interact with trauma?*

Serious risk factors that may be affected are a past history of suicidal behavior, existing serious mental illness (particularly with a co-occurring anxiety or panic disorder), alcohol and substance abuse, marital, family, or other interpersonal conflict, and a background involving abuse or violence.

### *Are there population groups that may have a higher level of trauma-related suicide risk?*

Trauma sufferers with a risk of suicide include self-injurers, those making frequent threats or non-fatal attempts, veterans and members of the military, physicians, emergency responders, sexual assault victims, individuals with brain injury, and physically and developmentally disabled persons.

### *What are some of the early warning signs of suicide risk?*

Contact a mental health or medical provider if you encounter or experience any of these behaviors:

- Hopelessness, emptiness, or apathy
- Feeling helpless, trapped, out of control
- Withdrawal from family or friends
- Dramatic mood changes
- Rage, anger, or recklessness
- Increased drinking and/or drug use
- Anxiety, agitation, sleep problems
- Citing no reason for living, desire to die

### *What are the immediate danger signs of high suicide risk?*

Immediately call MCES (610-279-6100) or 9-1-1 if you encounter:

- Someone threatening to hurt or kill herself or himself
- Someone looking for ways to take her or his life (i.e., a gun, stockpiling pills, other lethal means)
- Someone talking, writing, or drawing about death, dying, or suicide