

Suicide risk guide will aid healthcare providers

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Broaching the delicate subject of suicide and assessing the risk can be challenging for healthcare providers. A new practical guide gives them tools to better know how to listen and help struggling patients.

"My hope is that it will improve our understanding and comfort in addressing suicide in health care," said Chris Perlman, scientific director of the Homewood Research Institute in Guelph. Perlman led the development of Suicide Risk Assessment: A Resource Guide for Canadian Health Care Organizations, a joint project of the Ontario Hospital Association and The Canadian Patient Safety Institute.

The guide came out of a review of patient safety issues in mental health, which identified suicide as a key issue. The team of researchers, which includes ones from the University of Waterloo and Homewood, set to work developing a risk assessment tool by reviewing literature and best practices.

"There's tons of information out there on this topic," Perlman said. "We needed to bring all that information together." They also interviewed people with expertise and personal knowledge from Waterloo Region, across Canada and internationally about what should go into the guide. "The myth is asking the question can make a person feel worse," Perlman said.

Quite the contrary. Experts say people in distress want to talk about suicide and asking the question opens the door to a useful discussion. "That can actually help them to feel better," Perlman said. Along with the assessment tools, the guide explains how to ask the questions and approach a patient experiencing hopelessness or thoughts of suicide with empathy and understanding. "Being comfortable in asking these questions can really go a long way in prevention," Perlman said.

Risk factors, including a person's life experiences, and warning signs are explained, but there's also information about how to talk about a person's strengths to deal with their current thoughts.

That approach of looking at the complexity of suicide risk pleases Paula Podolski, program director for adult mental health and emergency crisis services at Grand River Hospital. Assessing risk can't simply be done with a checklist, but rather an understanding of the individual, and that's explained in the guide. "I think it is a significant piece of work," Podolski said.

Tools only go so far, she said. The relationship between the healthcare provider and patient is crucial to truly assess risk. While psychiatric healthcare workers

get in-depth training about suicide risk and assessment, other front-line staff, such as family doctors, often do not have much training to deal with patients experiencing suicidal thoughts. The guide is intended to help those professionals provide better care and identify risk early with the goal of helping a patient feel better and ultimately prevent suicide.

"Suicide risk is often thought to be something you manage in a hospital where people are acutely ill and suicidal," Podolski said. Yet she said healthcare providers out in the community have just as important a role in reaching out to those at risk. "They need to be asking the important and sometimes challenging questions."

Across Canada, about 3,500 people a year commit suicide. Locally, suicide claims one life every week and police respond to three attempts a day, on average. Canada does not have a national suicide prevention strategy, but Perlman said progress is being made as the topic of suicide is discussed more openly and more often. "I believe we're on a strong trajectory of improvement."

The guide can be found at www.oha.com