

A Guide for Clinicians:

Universal Precautions

What are Universal Precautions and why use them?

- Universal Precautions are measures taken to prevent suicide attempts with *all* patients seeking behavioral health treatment, **regardless of whether they have come in for concerns specifically related to suicide.**
- Universal Precautions are **brief interventions** brief interventions that clinicians can use with everyone who presents for treatment.
- Universal Precautions are used to **help identify individuals who may be having suicidal thoughts** or risk factors that might be otherwise undetected.
- Universal Precautions are used to provide **psychoeducation and crisis resources** for suicide prevention.

Using Universal Precautions can also communicate to suicidal individuals that they do not have to be alone with their thoughts and feelings, and that help is available.

Why are Universal Precautions important?

Identifying individuals at risk for suicide who need targeted interventions is complex and challenging. Although those receiving behavioral health treatment are at greater risk, most (99%) will not die by suicide.

One of the most known risk factors for suicide is a past non-lethal attempt, yet **about 50% of those that die by suicide have had no previous suicide attempts.** Over half of those who die by suicide have had a healthcare visit in the month prior to their deaths in which their suicide risk went undetected. Also, individuals are sometimes reluctant to acknowledge suicidal thoughts because they fear hospitalization or anticipate that health professionals will not know how to help.

It is important to consider all who seek behavioral healthcare to be at heightened risk and therefore it is indicated to provide universal precautions.

Where are Universal Precautions needed?

Each type of behavioral health site will have a specific application of the suicide safer care model with site-specific protocols for patients. However, **it is crucial to instate universal precautions across all behavioral health settings** including CPEP, outpatient, and inpatient units.

For those in a CPEP setting, universal precautions are particularly important as they may present the *only* opportunity to make a targeted suicide prevention intervention.

The components of Universal Precautions include:

Psychoeducation

- Remind patients that **it is not uncommon for people suffering with a mental illness to have suicidal thoughts in their lifetime.**
- Provide the patient with **psychoeducation about the fluctuating nature of suicide risk** – i.e., how risk can come and go, but also increases or decreases in intensity over time.
- Provide the patient with suicide-specific psychoeducation regarding **common warning signs** (thoughts, feelings, and behaviors) that precede suicide risk, such as: feeling increasingly hopeless, isolating oneself or withdrawing from social interactions, and/or misusing drugs and/or alcohol. The **FACTS** acronym is useful here – certain **Feelings, Actions, Changes, Talking, and Situations** can be warning signs.
- After explaining that warning signs often precipitate suicide risk, ask the patient if any of the warning signs you listed as an example sound familiar to them. If the patient can identify possible warning signs, encourage them to reach out if they notice these signs in the future, even if the patient has no history of suicidal thoughts or behaviors.

Crisis Resources

- Provide *all* patients with useful contacts that can be used during a suicidal crisis such as the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** (1-800-273-8255) or **Crisis Text Line** (text "Got5" to 741741).
- Suggest that patients put these emergency resources into their phone while you are with them so that they have easy access to 24/7 free, confidential support if a suicidal crisis arose. It is also a good idea to have pre-printed resources to give to your patient as a back-up.
- If your patient would prefer to speak to a resource that has interventions tailored to specific identities (i.e., lifelines for LGBTQIA, youth, or veterans), be familiar with and able to provide these resources.

Contact SP-TIEInfo@nyspi.columbia.edu for more information

