

Pathways to Wellness: Integrating Suicide Prevention in Substance Use Disorder Treatment

Two Struggles, One Story: The Intersection of Suicide Risk and Substance Use

In 2022, more than 49,000 people died by suicide in the U.S., making it the country's eleventh most common cause of death.¹ According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)'s [2023 National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#), 1 in 6 people in the U.S. ages 12 or older met the diagnostic criteria for a substance use disorder (SUD), including alcohol use disorder (10.2%) and drug use disorder (9.7%).² Furthermore, emergency department (ED) data from January 2021 through March 2023 showed teens and young adults ages 12 to 25 had the highest rates of ED visits involving both a suicide attempt and substance use among all groups studied.³

Research indicates suicide risk is 8 to 10 times higher among people who are receiving treatment for alcohol abuse or dependence than the general population.⁴ Alcohol use disorder is second only to mood disorder as the most frequently identified psychiatric problem among people who die by suicide worldwide.⁵

People who use opioids are 14 times more likely to die by suicide than the general population.⁵ Notably, there is a bi-directional effect among youth. A systemic review and meta-analysis found that among youth, SUDs are highly correlated with later suicidality, and suicidality is highly correlated with subsequent SUDs.⁶

“The REAL story that those of us that have lived this know to be true: the intersection lies in the despair and desperation that addiction causes. The dark hole that it leads to that seemingly has no way out other than death.”

– S. Klassen

Recognition of the increased risk for suicide among people with substance use disorders has prompted SUD treatment professionals to begin screening for suicide risk and providing brief interventions, such as collaborative suicide safety planning or patient education.⁷ According to the [National Substance Use and Mental Health Services Survey \(N-SUMHSS\) 2023](#), suicide prevention services were offered at 58% of all SUD treatment facilities and about half (48%) of outpatient SUD treatment facilities.⁸ This is encouraging progress, but there is still room for improvement. Historically, people with SUDs have often been referred to other providers when suicide risk was suspected, contributing to a cycle of referral rather than intervention.⁹ However, it has been shown that when SUD care providers practice routine screening for suicide risk, and follow up when needed with brief suicide risk assessments and collaborative safety planning, it can reduce suicidality, increase client safety, and promote recovery.⁷

Integrating Suicide Risk Screening and Brief Interventions in Substance Use Treatment

Routinely using standardized suicide risk screening tools and providing brief suicide prevention interventions in substance use treatment settings can be a feasible and effective part of comprehensive care.¹⁰ Training substance use treatment providers in standardized screening and brief suicide risk assessment processes is a proactive way to integrate suicide prevention care into substance use treatment and increase providers' confidence and competence.⁷

*"With both clinical and lived experience in mental health and suicide prevention, I've seen firsthand how substance use can impair judgment and decision-making, especially during a mental health crisis. That's why **routine** suicide screening in substance use treatment is essential—these issues are closely linked, and individuals in distress deserve care that addresses both."*

— A. Assadi

Furthermore, the American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM)'s [National Practice Guideline for the Treatment of Opioid Use Disorder](#) (National Practice Guideline) emphasizes the importance of comprehensive suicide risk assessment and evidence-based interventions to help reduce suicide risk among people with co-occurring substance use and mental health disorders.¹¹

Moving Forward

Peers, recovery support specialists, and substance use treatment providers can learn to recognize when someone being treated for substance use is at risk for suicide and utilize suicide risk screening tools to ask direct questions. Substance use treatment staff already skillfully manage many difficult conversations with clients about substance use and other complex challenges such as cravings, strained relationships, legal problems, and health consequences of substance use. These conversations can be expanded to include discussions of suicidal thoughts or behaviors. By directly addressing suicide risk, SUD treatment providers can offer critical support during vulnerable moments in a client's recovery journey.

"In my darkest moments, I needed someone to look away from their computer, put down their books, and speak from their heart. I needed them to be comfortable in the discomfort of asking the hard questions because I could not come out and say that I wanted to die.

Be blunt, speak from your heart, offer hope where there is none. This is what saves lives."

— S. Klassen

Incorporating routine suicide risk screening, assessment, brief interventions, and safety planning into substance use treatment can help clinical providers create a more cohesive, evidence-based model of care that prioritizes person-centered recovery and safety.¹² An integrated approach to treatment encourages substance use treatment teams to address a client's risk for both suicide and substance use, so the client finds "no wrong door" and gets the care they need with the provider they know.

Resources

Suicide risk screening tools

- [Ask Suicide-Screening Questions \(ASQ\) Toolkit](#) – Screening and brief assessment toolkit for use in a variety of settings, including outpatient and specialty clinics.
- [The Columbia Protocol: Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale \(C-SSRS\)](#) – Screening tool for suicide risk with simple, plain language questions.

Suicide risk assessment resources

- [The SAFE-T Suicide Assessment Protocol: Integration Into the EMR and Assignment of Suicide Risk](#) – Information and resources on the use of the SAFE-T protocol to assess suicide risk.
- [Applying Motivational Interviewing in Suicide Risk Assessment](#) – SPRC webinar that explores how clinicians can use motivational interviewing as a valuable tool in suicide risk assessment.
- [Suicide Risk Assessment Toolkit](#) – SPRC resources to help behavioral health clinicians conduct effective suicide risk assessment.

Suicide risk reduction and management

- [Counseling on Access to Lethal Means](#) – Online course from Zero Suicide about how to reduce access to the methods people use to kill themselves.
- [Talking About Lethal Means: A Course for Crisis Counselors](#) – SPRC online course designed for crisis line workers about how to collaborate with individuals in crisis to reduce their access to lethal means during a crisis conversation.
- [Stanley-Brown Safety Planning Intervention Training Videos](#) – Online training in a brief intervention in which a clinician and client collaboratively create a prioritized list of coping strategies and sources of support for use in times of crisis to reduce acute suicide risk.
- [Crisis Response Plan Training](#) – Strong Star Training Initiative online training in using a brief intervention to assist an individual at risk for suicide in selecting actions and activities they can use in times of crisis. Training intended for peers, family, friends, and clinical providers and geared toward supporting veterans and those in the military.

Caring contacts, care transitions, and follow up

- [Caring Message Connections](#) – Dr. Ursula Whiteside’s online training for providers on using caring contacts to help people experiencing suicidality feel more connected and reduce the risk of suicide.
- [Staying in Touch: Using Caring Contacts to Sustain Connection With Your Clients](#) – Northwest Addiction Technology Transfer Center Network curriculum focused on using caring contacts as a low-threshold intervention to fill treatment gaps during times of stress and isolation.
- [Best Practices in Care Transitions](#) – National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention’s guide to ensuring continuity of care for clients who are transitioning between levels of care and connecting with different providers.

Substance use treatment resources

- [Addressing a Co-Occurring Epidemic: Substance Misuse and Suicide](#) – Prevention Technology Transfer Center Network webinar analyzing the co-occurring epidemics of substance misuse and suicide. Offers professionals in the field ways to navigate and overcome barriers to treating clients at risk of substance misuse disorder and suicide, such as stigma, misconceptions, and treatment access.
- [Nexus Between Substance Misuse Prevention and Suicide Prevention](#) – Prevention Technology Transfer Center Network webinar and fact sheet introducing evidence-based guiding principles for community prevention frameworks, strategies, and policies.
- [Overdose and Suicide: Identifying Risks and Opportunities for Intervention](#) – Central East Addiction Technology Transfer Center Network fact sheet focused on the connections between overdoses, suicide, and evidence-based interventions.
- [Resources for Substance Use Disorder Treatment](#) – Zero Suicide tools and resources for substance use disorder treatment.

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