

WHAT IT IS

Safety planning is a collaborative process between the staff and students to increase warning sign awareness and build internal coping strategies to overcome challenges they may face related to self-harm, suicide, and general functioning. Safety planning is a process, rather than a singular event or document, that is rooted deeply in the staff and student relationship. It begins with a conversation to identify areas of risk, assess access to supports, limit lethal means, and provide the student with diverse alternative options for their suicidal thoughts and/or actions.

Safety planning should not be confused with the concept of “contracting for safety” or “no-suicide contracts,” which have widely been rebuffed in the literature as ineffective tools that give staff and administrators a false sense of security and may reduce their vigilance related to harm. There is no substitute for the careful and repeated assessment of risk, along with the staff assisting the student in thinking critically about alternative options.

A good safety plan involves collaboration between the staff and students rather than an autocratic process. It involves an assessment of current cognitive, physical, environmental, and social factors that may exacerbate suicidal ideation and escalations toward action. Safety planning requires a diverse and expansive review of supportive options available to the student. This should include physical activities such as going to the gym or taking a shower, reaching out to social supports or online communities, and having access to emergency hotlines and after-hours clinical support. The plan should be brief, easy to read and understand, and reduce access to lethal means.

WHO TO USE IT WITH

Students who present a risk of self-harm, suicide, or generally are rated at a higher level of risk or concern by a BIT/CARE or threat team. While this is not a clinical risk mitigation process (a fancy way of saying this safety planning should be in addition to the planning a licensed therapist would do), the idea of creating options for a student facing a crisis or unsure what steps to take to be safe is the concern of all staff.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

1. What crisis events have happened previously that would be a priority to anticipate and plan for moving forward?
2. It can be hard to find the perfect thing to do when you are feeling lousy. What are some ways you’ve had some success helping yourself start a task (like taking a shower or going for a walk) that you know will help you feel better?

TEACHING INSIGHTS

- One of the biggest challenges when offering others a list of options is the old parenting challenge of “I’m bored.” “Well, go outside.” “I don’t want to do that.” When managing this challenge, the first step to success is anticipating that every option on the next page won’t connect with each student you are working with. Anticipate only a few of these options will be good ones for each student. A big part of our work is helping them sort through these options and find the one or two that are right for them.
- The list on the next page is generic. Consider taking the list and making it more customized for your setting. One idea could be having each of the staff in your department suggest their favorite podcast or movie recommendations based on different themes.

TAKING STEPS TOWARD SAFETY

The following list offers a variety of ideas of things to consider when you are feeling overwhelmed or you're not sure what to do next.

- **Take a Shower:** The warmth of the water and relaxation of the shower experience can be a solid choice to break a cycle of worry, frustration, or anger.
- **Read/listen to a Favorite Book or Podcast:** The escape of reading can often take us out of a stressful situation and transport us to another world for a time. Another option is listening to a book on Audible or a book summary on an app such as Headway. Podcasts are another great way to help feel connected to a larger community without the anxiety or worry that may occur when meeting new people.
- **See a Movie:** Consider seeing a new movie in the theater or watching a favorite movie at home. Many libraries offer audiobooks and movies as part of their service to the community.
- **Go for a Walk:** Sometimes, a change of scenery and some fresh air can shift you out of negative thoughts. Even a short walk is good exercise and releases endorphins that can change your mood.
- **Exercise/Workout/Sports:** A more targeted approach to that endorphin release involves going through some cardio and muscle building. From swimming to weightlifting, working out can help shift you out of a difficult mood. There may be clubs and intramural sports on campus that can be a way to exercise and spend time with people.
- **Play a Video Game:** If you have a video game system, this can be a useful way to escape to an alternative world for a bit.
- **Have an Emergency Number/Online Support:** Research and have an emergency number (such as 988) available prior to needing it. The same goes for online support and texting to a professional group or organization.
- **Text/Call a Friend:** Have a list of friends that you can reach out to when you aren't feeling your best. Have a few options in case your first choice of a support person can't respond.
- **Meditation Class/App:** Consider joining a movement/meditation class such as Tai Chi or look for some online apps in the meditation space that can help reduce your stress when your mind gets racing. Some examples are Headspace, Calm, Breethe, Buddhify, and Meditation Moments.
- **Have a Healthy Snack:** Try having a snack if you are feeling overwhelmed, irritable, or sad. Like with exercise, eating something nutritious can change your mood, balance your blood sugar, and maybe help to shift your perspective.
- **Listen to Music:** Music can have a powerful impact on our mood. A favorite song or playlist can lift you out of a stuck place.
- **Use a Distraction Toy:** These little handy devices can help manage anxiety and help us think about something else for a time.
- **Make a Favorite Meal:** Think about your favorite meal or comfort food. Consider a trip to the grocery store and put together a meal for yourself or with some friends.
- **Find a Furry Friend:** The act of petting and spending time with a dog, cat, or other pet may be just the thing to help shift your mood.