

Management of the Suicidal Patient in the Emergency Department

Prepared by Horizon Health Behavioral Health Services



The Suicidal Patient in the Emergency Department

Suicide is one of the top ten causes of death in the United States, claiming twice as many lives each year as homicide. Over the past several years we have witnessed a gradual increase of suicidal patients seeking care in hospital emergency departments (ED). In many situations, the staff caring for these patients is not adequately prepared to address the multi-dimensional issues that contribute to the patient's dire situation. This trend, unfortunately, is not expected to dissipate in the foreseeable future. The ED has become the stop-gap plan for behavioral health crises due to shrinking community resources and lack of psychiatric services and beds. The reality is, that for every person who completes a suicide, more than 30 others attempt suicide, and thus present extraordinary clinical challenges for ED staff.

The Joint Commission's 2014 National Patient Safety Goal 15.01.01 mandates that hospitals identify patients at risk for suicide. This requires an assessment process that identifies patients at risk, and recognizes environmental factors that may affect the patient's risk level for suicide. There is also a requirement to immediately address the safety needs of the patient, including the patient's safety during their stay in the ED. Hospitals are required to provide suicide prevention information to each patient and their family member(s) when a patient that is potentially at risk for suicide is discharged.

To meet these requirements, hospitals must take a comprehensive and thorough approach to managing the suicidal patient in the ED, and identify and develop an appropriate discharge disposition.

If you would like to evaluate your ED's level of readiness to handle these patients, consider the following questions:

Does your ED have a comprehensive approach to meet the needs of the suicidal patient and their families? For instance,

- Is your suicide risk assessment process evidence-based to provide appropriate evaluation and recommendations for treatment?
- Is your ED staff educated and supported by behavioral health providers to recognize the warning signs of patients at risk for suicide?
- Do you have policies and procedures in place specific to this patient population?
- Does your staff follow trauma-informed policies to ensure the patient is treated with respect and in a way that promotes healing and recovery?
- Does your documentation include a clear and concise review of risk and protective factors and measures taken to ensure patient safety?

Is your ED staff challenged when dealing with suicidal patients and their families? Specifically,

- Is there an awareness of specific groups and their clinical presentations that identifies these groups as higher risk than the general population for suicidal behaviors?
- Is your staff providing appropriate referrals to ensure continuity of care and reduce risk once the patient leaves your ED?
- Does your staff follow written standardized protocols based on common clinical presentations to allow for more differentiated responses based on each patient's risk profile and assessed needs?
- Has your ED developed guidelines and competencies to effectively engage families and concerned others as appropriate throughout the care of persons with suicide risk?

About Horizon Health

As a leading behavioral services management company, we partner with hospitals seeking to optimize the delivery of behavioral health services. We bring our clinical, operational, and financial expertise to implement behavioral health programs that result in patient improvement and satisfaction.

If you are interested in learning high-quality ways to launch a new behavioral health program or how to improve your existing one, contact us today to start your facility assessment.



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References

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2. Suicide Prevention, Toolkit for Implementing National Patient Safety Goal 15 A, The Joint Commission.