



Identifying suicide risk in refugees and asylum seekers

Supporting health staff identify key behaviours,
speech and mood changes that may indicate
suicidality in refugees and asylum seekers.



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About this resource

This resource contains information to support health staff identify key behaviours, patterns of speech and mood changes which may indicate suicidality in refugees and asylum seekers. There are a number of signs, behaviours and situations which may indicate the presence of suicidality in refugees and asylum seekers.

USING THIS RESOURCE

The information in this resource is designed to support suicide prevention in refugees and asylum seekers. It is recommended that this information is used in conjunction with advice from health professionals, workplace policies and other resources. A list of helpful resources is located at the end of this fact sheet.

IDENTIFYING SUICIDE RISK

Health and support staff have an opportunity to identify signs of suicide risk when working with refugee or asylum seeker clients. It is important to pay attention to how refugees and asylum seekers communicate about themselves or their perceived problems, and identify any changes in mood or behaviour. Be aware of significant situations and events that have potential to cause significant distress in refugees and asylum seekers.

When considering suicide risk for refugees and asylum seekers, it is important to take into consideration an individual's whole experience, not just focus on one factor.



TALK

Mental health and suicide translate very differently across cultures. Refugees and asylum seekers may not directly say they are experiencing suicidal thoughts, but may give insights in other ways.

Refugees and asylum seekers may be experiencing suicidality if they:

- Talk about life in a negative way
- Refer to how life was better in their home country
- Talk about emotional pain
- Talk about unexplained physical pain
- Have a perception that they are a burden
- Have a perception that they don't belong
- Have a perception they will be forgotten or not missed
- Feel severely disconnected in themselves and/or with their culture and community.

BEHAVIOUR

Out of character, compulsive or withdrawn behaviour can indicate psychological distress and suicidality in refugees and asylum seekers.

Examples of behaviour that may raise concern:

- Inability to focus or engage in conversation
- Being 'on edge', anxious or easily startled
- Being unable to remember or process information
- Increase or uptake of drugs or alcohol
- Engaging in risky behaviours
- Withdrawing from social activities, culture or relationships
- Spending time alone or going places alone without telling others
- Self-harm or previous suicide attempt.

MOOD

Noticing mood changes in refugee and asylum seeker clients can indicate the person is at an increased risk of suicide.

Examples of psychological distress may include:

- Frequent mood changes
- Inability to be excited
- Seeming withdrawn
- Lack of emotion/over emotional
- Overreacting/lashing out
- Feeling calm or unusually happy
- Feeling threatened
- Sleep disturbances.

SITUATIONS AND EVENTS

Exposure to situations or events may cause a traumatic response for refugees and asylum seekers.

Examples include experiencing:

- Anniversaries or birthdays of loved ones they are separated from
- Anniversaries of wars in their home country
- Significant dates of their refugee or asylum seeker journey
- Death of a family member or friend
- Relationship breakdowns
- Losing a job
- Losing a house/becoming homeless
- Strong experience of racism
- Natural disasters
- Watching TV shows or news that depict trauma or suicide.

When communicating with refugees or asylum seekers:

- Be aware of how culture can impact conversations about suicide
- Work in partnership with communities to understand the cultural appropriateness of discussing mental health and suicide
- Consider the benefit of an interpreting service to support conversations around mental health and suicide
- Include family members in conversations and identify opportunities for intergenerational learning.

Further information

Conversations Matter: [conversationsmatter.com.au](https://www.conversationsmatter.com.au)

Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors: [startts.org.au](https://www.startts.org.au)

Asylum Seeker Resource Centre: [asrc.org.au](https://www.asrc.org.au)

NSW Transcultural Mental Health Centre: dhi.health.nsw.gov.au/transcultural-mental-health-centre