



Risk factors for mental illness and suicidality in refugees and asylum seekers

There is no single factor that contributes to suicide or suicidal behaviour. It is important to acknowledge the complexity and interaction between many risk and protective factors for refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia.



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About this resource

This resource contains key information about risk and protective factors for suicide in refugees and asylum seekers, including challenges associated with their journey and resettlement.

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 and resources. A list of helpful resources is available at the end of this fact sheet.

Refugees and asylum seekers have unique experiences that contribute to their overall mental health outcomes. Political, social and economic contexts, combined with cultural factors and individual biological and physiological factors, can impact on an individual's suicide risk. The presence of protective factors can reduce suicide risk in refugees and asylum seekers.

When considering suicide risk for refugees or asylum seekers, it is important to take into consideration an individual's whole experience, not just focus on one factor. Be open, use respectful language and work alongside the individual's spiritual and cultural practices and beliefs.



RISK FACTORS FOR SUICIDE IN REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

Consider the following personal, social and economic factors that may increase suicide risk in refugees and asylum seekers. Please note this is not a complete list of all risk factors. For more information, see resources listed at the end of this fact sheet.

- Temporary visa status
- Experience of trauma, war, genocide, political oppression, and sexual violence
- Previous suicide attempt
- Disconnectedness from home country
- Loss of culture
- Loss of loved ones
- Loss of place in society/ loss of sense of worth
- Temporary visa status
- Previous suicide attempt
- Disconnectedness from home country
- Recognition or understanding of mental health
- Cultural acceptability of suicide
- Low socioeconomic status
- No or infrequent income
- Limited or no access to housing and safe, private accommodation
- Language barriers
- Fear of the unknown (suicide better outcome)
- Lack of social support
- Experiencing discrimination and racism
- Identifying as LGBTIQ+ or as part of a minority religious group
- Situational triggers, anniversaries, events.

ASYLUM SEEKER SPECIFIC RISK FACTORS FOR SUICIDE

Asylum seekers have a unique set of experiences and factors that may contribute to suicide risk. Please note, this is not a complete list of all risk factors. Its important to take into account the whole individual including their experiences and culture. The presence of one or more of these risk factors could indicate distress for the individual and may or may not be accompanied by other signs of suicidal risk. For more information, see resources listed at the end of this fact sheet.

- Uncertainty of visa status or temporary nature of visa status
- Access to health services, Medicare, education, other support services
- Having an experience of trauma
- Length of time spent in detention settings
- Separation from family
- Release from detention into the general community
- Access to Government financial support
- High risk of homelessness
- Limited capacity to support themselves and their family financially
- Limited access to health or mental health services and support.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR SUICIDE RISK IN REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

Protective factors can help prevent mental illness and reduce risk of suicide in refugees and asylum seekers. Please note this is not a complete list of all risk factors. For more information, see resources listed at the end of this fact sheet.

Protective factors include:

- Connection to emotions and mind
- Understanding of mental illness
- Connection to family and support networks
- Connection to community/ social capital
- Connection to culture
- Cultural stigma and acceptability
- Low suicide rate of the home country
- Young age of migration
- English proficiency
- High level of self-esteem/self-control
- Sense of purpose (employment, carer etc.)
- Personal coping mechanisms/ resilience
- Limited time in detention
- Fast approval of visas
- Visa status that entitles working/health rights
- Minimised exposure to sexual and physical abuse in detention settings.

There is no single factor that contributes to suicide, suicidal ideation or suicidal behaviour. The factors that contribute to someone taking their own life can be very complex. It is important to acknowledge the complex interaction between a range of risk and protective factors over the lifespan of each individual. Most importantly, recognise the broader picture of mental health and suicide for refugees and asylum seekers at present and in future.

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