

Safety Planning Intervention (SPI)



Summary of Steps to Implement

A. SPI is typically preceded by a risk assessment or screening.

- a. This should include time to talk about events fairly immediately before or leading up to the crisis, what happened at the peak of the crisis and what happened after.
- b. This is when the clinician and person in crisis can begin “cuing into” possible warning signs and strategies to get help.
- c. Like the Collaborative Assessment and Management of Suicidality (CAMS), SPI is a collaborative process, where the clinician can sit next to the person, taking a problem-solving approach to develop a plan together with the person in crisis.
- d. Motivational Interviewing (MI) strategies can be used to structure the Safety Planning Intervention or throughout the process. Specific MI concepts that can be helpful include OARS, scaling questions, evoking change talk, etc.

B. Step 1: Warning Signs

- a. These are thoughts, feelings and behaviors that most immediately precede the suicidal crisis (thoughts of suicide or suicidal behaviors).
- b. Thoughts may include thought processes (such as racing thoughts), images or impulses.
- c. Sometimes, situations (such as interpersonal arguments) are included as warning signs.
- d. Warning signs for SPI should be individualized and are not the same as publicized warning signs in suicide prevention materials.
- e. Examples of what to ask:
 - i. “How will you know when you should use this plan?”
 - ii. “What feelings do you have just before you start to think about ending your life?”

C. Step 2: Internal Coping Strategies

- a. Things the person can do to distract or take their mind off the problems without contacting someone.
- b. Strategies should be individualized, specific and relevant to the person. For instance, listing “coping skills” is not as effective as listing a specific strategy such as “push-ups for 10 minutes.”
- c. Always assess if the person believes that they can in fact use these strategies and if they say they cannot, then explore any barriers and engage in problem solving with the person to find solutions to the obstacles.
- d. Examples of what to ask:
 - i. “What kind of activities can you do to take the problems off of your mind just for a short while?”

D. Step 3: People and Social Situations that can Provide Distraction:

- a. The goal is to find social or situational distraction or to help the person feel connected.
- b. These can be casual and informal relationships and situations but should be safe.
- c. The person does not talk about the crisis with the people listed. This can just be “small talk” and casual.
- d. As in Step 2, determine if the person believes they can use these strategies and if not, what are the obstacles. Problem-solve to find solutions to the obstacles.
- e. Examples of what to ask:
 - i. “Who helps you to take your mind off of your problems, just for a little while?”

E. Step 4: People Whom I can Ask for Help During a Crisis

- a. These are people specifically identified to help in a crisis.
- b. These can be family or friends or professional supports.
- c. For children and adolescents, this should always be an adult and not a peer.
- d. As in prior steps, determine the person's belief that they can perform this step. If they cannot, what are the obstacles? Problems solve with them for solutions.
- e. Ideally, the people listed in this section should be aware of the safety plan and should indicate they are able to assist the person. This is not always required or feasible though for adults. Remember, this is a collaborative process and should not create more stress or burden on the person.
- f. Examples of what to ask:
 - i. "Who do you think can help you in a crisis?"

F. Step 5: Professionals or Agencies I Can Call During a Crisis

- a. Contacted if prior strategies are not effective.
- b. At least one should be available 24/7. This could be 988 or a crisis line.
- c. Continue assessing the person's ability to perform this step, determine any obstacles and problem solve solutions as needed.
- d. Examples of what to ask:
 - i. "What professional services can you call any time in a crisis?"

G. Step 6: Making the Environment Safer (Plan for Lethal Means Safety):

- a. Always explore access to firearms even if the person does not have thoughts about using a firearm to take their life.
- b. Ask the person what means they would consider using in a crisis.
- c. When possible, it is advisable for a 3rd party such as a friend to help with ensuring firearms are secured safely.
- d. Counseling on Access to Lethal Means (CALM) strategies work very well with SPI in this section.
- e. Examples of what to ask:
 - i. "How do you think you might try to end your life in a crisis?"
 - ii. "What are some ideas that you have about how to make the environment safer?"

H. Assess the likelihood that the person will use the safety plan in a crisis and implement the plan.

- a. Determine what the obstacles may be and explore solutions.
- b. Examples of what to ask:
 - i. "Do you believe that you can use this plan when you notice the warning signs?"
 - ii. "What do you think would stop you from using this plan?"
 - iii. "Let's think of some solutions to help you feel more able to use this plan. What ideas do you have?"
 - iv. "On a scale of 0 – 10, how confident do you feel that you can use this safety plan?"
- c. Provide a copy of the plan.
- d. Discuss where the person will keep the plan.
- e. Review and revise the plan periodically, with frequency of review depending on the need.
- f. In therapy, when addressing suicidal risk in treatment, prioritize review and revision at the beginning of each session (was it used, did it work?).

I. Adaptations of Safety Planning Intervention for youth.

- a. Use clear and understandable language. Break down concepts when needed.
- b. Use analogies if needed to help explain. For instance, using the analogy of a "fire drill" can be helpful. "It is important to have a plan if a fire emergency happens."
- c. Discuss any safety concerns about individual coping skills.

- d. Social distractions and trusted adults: Do they think the adult will get upset? Would their parents be okay with contacting this person?
- e. People to ask for help in case of a crisis: This should always be adults.
- f. Discuss involvement of parents/caregivers for the youth. Discuss the limits of confidentiality up front when possible.
- g. Talk through any issues the youth may have with you sharing details with parents before sharing the details.
- h. Explain that part of your role is to help parents by having a conversation with them and working toward a compromise.
- i. Make sure parents understand their part and how to get emergency help and how to make the environment safe.