



# Suicide and self-harm in older adults

Training Aid 1

## Understanding suicide and self-harm in older adults

Suicide and self-harm among older adults is a significant concern. Understanding the factors that contribute to these behaviours can help us provide better support. This training aid highlights key information, influencing factors, and effective approaches for advocates and caregivers.

### Key points

- Older adults who die by suicide often have not been under the care of mental health services, making awareness crucial.
- Mental health crises can go unnoticed, leading to tragic outcomes.

## Influencing factors for self-harm in older adults

Several factors may contribute to self-harming behaviour in older adults, including:

- **Low socioeconomic status:** Limited access to education can lead to fewer resources for coping with life's challenges.
- **Loss:** The death of a spouse or close family member can trigger deep feelings of grief and despair.
- **Interpersonal conflicts:** Difficulties with family or friends can increase feelings of isolation and hopelessness.
- **Physical illness:** Chronic or terminal illnesses can lead to pain and stress, contributing to feelings of helplessness.
- **Loneliness and social isolation:** Many older adults feel lonely, which can negatively impact mental health.
- **Alcohol and drug use:** Substance misuse can exacerbate mental health problems and increase risk factors for self-harm.
- **Financial and housing issues:** Economic pressures can lead to stress and feelings of being overwhelmed.
- **Poor mental health:** Existing mental health issues can heighten vulnerability to self-harm.

## Common methods of self-harm

Older adults may use various methods for self-harm, including:

- **Self-poisoning:** Overdosing or ingesting harmful substances.
- **Self-injury:** Cutting or burning themselves.

- **Other methods:** Such as hanging or jumping in front of vehicles.

## Recognising warning signs

- Changes in behaviour or mood, such as withdrawal from social activities.
- Expressions of hopelessness or feelings of being a burden.
- Discussions about self-harm or suicide.

## Supporting older adults

Advocates can play a crucial role in supporting older adults by:

- **Engaging in conversations:** Encourage open dialogue to understand feelings and concerns.
- **Identifying support systems:** Help connect individuals to available resources, including mental health services and community programs.
- **Providing reassurance:** Offer emotional support to reduce feelings of isolation.

## Key takeaways for advocates

### 1. Recognise the signs:

- Understand and identify the warning signs of suicidal thoughts and self-harming behaviours in older adults, such as changes in mood, withdrawal from social activities, and expressions of hopelessness.

### 2. Engage with empathy:

- Approach individuals with kindness and understanding. Use active listening techniques to allow them to express their feelings and concerns freely.

### 3. Supportive conversations:

- Practice open-ended questioning to facilitate deeper conversations about an individual's thoughts and feelings. For instance, ask "Can you share what's been on your mind lately?" to encourage dialogue.

### 4. Resource identification:

- Familiarize yourself with local resources, including mental health services, social support groups, and helplines that specialize in elder care.

### 5. Empower individuals:

- Encourage older adults to share their feelings and thoughts, reinforcing that their voice matters in any decision-making processes related to their care and wellbeing.

### 6. Safety planning:

- Collaborate with individuals to create a safety plan, including coping strategies and emergency contacts for times of crisis.

### 7. Collaboration with other professionals:

- Work alongside healthcare providers, social workers, and family members to ensure a comprehensive support network is established for the individual.

## 8. Cultural sensitivity:

- Be aware of the cultural backgrounds and preferences of the individuals you support, as these can impact their mental health and coping mechanisms.

## Follow Your Voice Counts safeguarding policy and procedures

When working with older adults who may be at risk of suicide or self-harm, it is essential to adhere to the YVC safeguarding policy and procedures. This ensures that any identified risks are managed appropriately, and that the individual's safety is prioritised.

### Key steps to follow

1. **Identify risk:** Be vigilant in recognising signs of potential risk. This may include verbal indicators, changes in behaviour, or physical signs of distress. Always trust your instincts; if something feels off, it's important to investigate further.
2. **Report concerns:** If you identify a risk, report your concerns to a manager or the designated safeguarding lead immediately. Prompt reporting allows for timely interventions and support.
3. **Document findings:** Keep detailed records of your observations and any conversations you have with the individual. This documentation can be crucial for understanding the context and for any subsequent actions taken.
4. **Engage in multi-agency collaboration:** With consent (unless implied by the role i.e., IMCA, RPR), work with other professionals involved in the individual's care, such as healthcare providers and social workers. Sharing relevant information and concerns can lead to a comprehensive understanding of the individual's needs and risks.
5. **Follow up:** After reporting and documenting, ensure that appropriate actions are taken and follow up on the situation. Regular check-ins can help monitor the individual's wellbeing and the effectiveness of any interventions.
6. **Review policies regularly:** Stay informed about YVC safeguarding policies and procedures. Regular training and updates can equip you with the knowledge and skills to act confidently when risks are identified.

### Why this matters

Adhering to safeguarding policies not only protects the individual but also reinforces the integrity of the advocacy process. By following established procedures, advocates contribute to a safer environment for those at risk and ensure that appropriate measures are taken to address concerns promptly.

## Reflection and discussion prompts

- What are the common barriers you observe in older adults when discussing mental health and self-harm?
- How can you apply the principles of professional curiosity in your interactions with older adults facing these challenges?
- Share experiences or strategies that have worked well in your practice to support older adults.



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