



The Role of Senior Living Communities in Preventing Suicide

A senior living community (SLC) is any residential facility or community for older adults, including but not limited to independent living or retirement communities, assisted living facilities, skilled nursing facilities, and continuing care retirement communities. Given that suicide rates are high among adults ages 65 and older, it is important to be alert to signs of suicide risk in SLCs. Awareness of warning signs, understanding of risk factors, and promotion of emotional health for all residents can help reduce suicide risk. SLC personnel can play a key role in connecting residents with mental health resources—and ultimately in preventing suicide.

Respond to Warning Signs

If you see any **immediate** signs of risk, take the following steps right away:

1. Do not leave the resident alone.
2. Remove any lethal means from the resident's room or apartment.
3. Get in touch with a mental health professional, and engage the individual at risk in ongoing care.
4. If the danger for self-harm seems imminent, call 911.

If you see any **serious**—but less immediate—signs of risk, talk with the resident in a supportive way and obtain his or her permission to get in touch with a mental health professional.

Understand Risk Factors

Risk factors are the medical and mental health conditions, personal characteristics, life circumstances, and situations that influence or are associated with a higher likelihood of problem outcomes such as suicide. Some of the factors that put older adults at greater risk of suicide are social isolation, poor physical and/or mental health, and substance misuse.¹ Suicide prevention efforts seek to reduce risk factors as well as strengthen the factors that protect individuals from suicide.

Promote Emotional Health

By promoting the emotional health and well-being of all residents, SLC personnel can strengthen protective factors—the circumstances and personal strengths that enhance residents' resilience and reduce the risk of suicide.

Personnel at senior living communities can take several steps to help nurture the emotional health of residents. Here are some examples of different strategies:

1. Ensure that residents have access to activities that promote their emotional health and well-being.



- Health-promoting activities, such as yoga, dance, or walking
- Spiritual activities, such as meditation or religious services
- Support groups to provide guidance on issues such as personal relationships, bereavement, transitions, and communication

Recognize Warning Signs

The following warning signs indicate **immediate** risk and require an emergency response:

- Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself
- Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or obtaining a gun
- Talking or writing about death, dying, or suicide

The warning signs below indicate **serious**—although less immediate—risk of suicide:

- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings

¹ Conwell, Y., Van Orden, K., & Caine, E. D. (2011). Suicide in older adults. *Psychiatric Clinics Of North America*, 34(2), 451–468.

2. Establish social networks among residents.



- Intellectual activities, such as a book club, chess club, or bridge club
- Creative activities, such as sewing, cooking, carpentry, or art lessons
- Volunteer activities, especially those involving engagement with younger generations

3. Create a physical and social environment that promotes emotional health and well-being.



- Plants, flowers, and ample sunlight
- Physical accommodations, such as handrails near walkways or large print on menus
- An atmosphere that is welcoming to people of different cultural and ethnic groups

4. Train staff on their role in promoting the emotional health of residents.



- Treating residents with respect
- Preventing elder abuse
- Communicating well and resolving conflicts
- Practicing staff self-care and stress management

Provide Links to Services

Personnel in SLCs can take many steps to help prevent suicide—looking for warning signs, understanding risk factors, and promoting emotional health. Still, there will be times when a resident will need the specialized support of a mental health professional. SLC personnel can help provide a link between residents and these services by reaching out to mental health professionals.

While some SLCs have mental health professionals on staff, others do not. If an SLC does not, here are some strategies for identifying ones in the larger community:

- Contact some or all of the following: hospitals (including emergency rooms and psychiatric units), mental health centers, pastoral counseling resources, and substance abuse treatment programs.
- In communications or correspondence, be sure to ask about the following topics:
 - » Willingness and capacity to serve residents both on and off site
 - » Types of services provided and cost
 - » Timeframe of response to both urgent and non-urgent requests
 - » Ability to provide follow-up care to residents

After one or more appropriate mental health professionals are identified, the following steps should be taken:

- Establish a protocol for when and how to contact a mental health professional and how to document referrals.
- Make sure all staff in the facility know who the mental health contacts are and how to reach them.

Sources:

- Suicide Prevention Resource Center. (2015). *The Role of Senior Living Community Professionals in Preventing Suicide*. Waltham, MA: Education Development Center, Inc.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2011). *Promoting Emotional Health and Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for Senior Living Communities*. Rockville, MD: Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.