

MFT Program Policy on How to Respond to Suicidal Clients

Policy Availability

The **Policy on How to Respond to Suicidal Clients** is available to the public via the [MFT Homepage > Accreditation > Policies and Handbook](#).

Suicide Assessment

While FamilyWorks is neither an emergency facility nor intended to function as a crisis center, therapists sometimes face crises that may be part of the presenting problem or that occur as the therapeutic process develops. Sometimes, the taking of one's own life may appear to be a good solution to a client. A person who states a desire/willingness to attempt suicide should be taken seriously.

Suicidal people sometimes try to communicate a message for help. The therapist's goal is to make alternative means of help readily available.

The client who talks about self-destruction also wants to live, although the balance may be tipped against that desire for the moment. No one is permanently continuously suicidal. People become more suicidal when their perspectives freeze, and their contexts narrow. There are two aspects to a frozen perspective, each of which requires careful exploration with the client for alternatives to coping with a situation, while not denying the real alternative of suicide. Helping the person choose an alternative to suicide reduces the risk that she will die inadvertently. Understanding a suicidal person is the first step in the helping process.

Steps to Follow

Consider the following when working with a suicidal client:

1. Stay calm, confident, and seek to make sense of your client's view, just as you would if the topic were not suicide.
 - Establish a relationship with the person. Affirm the client for talking with you about this. This is a positive step that suggests that the client may be working hard to stay alive.
 - You should already have identifying information (telephone number and where the person lives); however, if you are working with someone who walked into the clinic, you may not. When therapeutic timing permits, get as much of this as you can.
2. If you are uncertain about letting your client leave the clinic and return home because you fear he or she may be actively suicidal, immediately talk with a supervisor.
 - If your current supervisor (the faculty member facilitating your current practicum) is not in the office or you are unable to reach her by phone, contact any other faculty member or the Clinic Coordinator.

Assessment

FamilyWorks utilizes the *Risk and Resource Interview Guide* (RRIG) suicide assessment guide

protocol developed by Flemons and Gralnik. This guide can be found in the therapist's lounge as a hard copy and electronically in the [FamilyWorks Clinic Handbook](#). Students are trained to use this protocol in the *MFTH 7700 Assessment in Family Therapy* and *MFTH 7350 Legal and Ethical Issues* courses.

The Risk and Resource Interview Guide

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When confronted with clients in crisis, we bear responsibility for assessing whether they are in imminent danger of harming themselves or others. However, we are equally responsible for assessing whether they have access to the necessary resources for safely and effectively dealing with the crisis. A clinician who primarily hones in on problems and risk factors may arrive at an unnecessarily pessimistic clinical impression. In contrast, a clinician who primarily focuses on mediating factors and exceptions to problems may fail to grasp the depth of clients' distress and the severity of the danger they are in.

Given the isolating nature of suicidal ideation and actions, it is easy to become narrowly focused on the risks and resources of the individual client. Of necessity, we are always attempting to determine whether the person in front of us is in imminent danger. But to adequately answer this question, we need to attend carefully not only to the individual's unique experiences—thoughts, beliefs, history, emotions, and behaviors—but also to the interplay of these experiences with those of significant others (alive and deceased) in their social context. The *Risk and Resource Interview Guide* (RRIG) guides inquiry into the dangers and potentials in both the interior and the social worlds of clients, providing a means for obtaining the necessary information for making difficult choices regarding hospitalization and the breaking of confidentiality.

No paper-and-pencil assessment device can take the place of a well-conducted clinical interview and well-honed clinical judgment. The evaluation of a patient's risk for suicide should never be based upon a score of a single scale. Rather, a comprehensive assessment should be made (Brown, 2002, p. 37). In keeping with this view, we designed the RRIG as an organizing template for managing clinical interviews, rather than as a checklist to be rigidly followed. It pairs topics of inquiry, cueing the therapist to interweave explorations of risk with explorations of protective factors. We did this in recognition of the fact that no assessment instrument merely gathers information: Neutral questions do not exist. No therapist can make a determination of their clients' state of mind without simultaneously influencing to some degree how the client, themselves, are experiencing their situation. Thus, every question asked is not only a tool for collecting data, but also a tool for *intervening*, for contextualizing and shaping the clients' way of orienting to themselves and what they are facing. A sensitivity to *how* questions are posed, and an interlacing of risk and resource explorations helps clients not to feel grilled and to potentially recognize options and possibilities that have been escaping their notice.

How the Risk and Resource Interview Guide is Organized

The RRIG is organized in 2 x 2 tables, each of which offers you complementary questions for delving into clients' and their significant others' current or past experiences. It suggests possibilities for how to pose the questions, and, in the accompanying commentary to each table, we provide a rationale for the wording we've used, along with information that can help inform your listening. However, we want to caution you not to use the RRIG in a mechanical fashion, listing off questions one after the other. Instead of keeping the RRIG between you and your clients, we suggest you keep it beside you, drawing from it as a means of unfolding a conversation. If you do this, the content and form of the next question you ask will depend on the answer your clients give to the last one. Because such interactional sensitivity can't be pre-planned, the questions in the tables are not nearly as nuanced as the ones you will ask in your interviews. A client's answer to your first question under a particular topic may render obsolete any subsequent questions listed in the table, or it may require more in-depth questions than those listed.

The topics covered in the RRIG are arranged in approximate order of clinical significance. Although a thorough crisis assessment would almost certainly include an exploration of the first seven or so categories (and perhaps some of the others), it is doubtful that you would need to exhaustively explore every topic before being able to make a sound clinical decision regarding client safety. As soon as you are confident that you have the necessary information to take action—whether to take steps toward hospitalization, to develop a safety plan, or to end the session, knowing the client is safe—you can stop following the guide.

The interactional orientation of the RRIG allows you to pick up on the relationship between your clients and their significant others, as well as the relationship between their despair and their reasons for hope and/or survival. But as you explore these issues, you will also be attending closely to their interaction with *you*. As you talk with clients in crisis, continually attend to whether they are

- Responding to what you say
- Making eye contact.
- Answering your questions thoughtfully.
- Able to elaborate on answers when you request them to do so.

Stay attuned to clients' interpersonal participation as you explore the following areas:

The following Risk and Resource Interview Guide is taken from **Flemons, D. & Gralnik, L. (2013). *Relational suicide assessment: Risks, resources, and possibilities for safety*. W. W. Norton.**

Risk and Resource Interview Guide

■ Suicidal/Homicidal Thoughts

	Client	Client's Significant Others
Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you had thoughts about taking your/someone else's life? • How do you make sense of this? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do your SOs know about the thoughts you've been having? • If they knew, what would be their response? • How would they make sense of it?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever succeeded at not acting on an urge to take your/someone else's life? • How do you make sense of this? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have your SOs talked to you about not acting on your urges? • How do they make sense of your previous successes at not acting on urges?

■ Plans

	Client	Client's Significant Others
Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have any intent or plan to harm yourself? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do any of your SOs know about this plan? • If they did, would they take it seriously? • What action would they take?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What plans do you have to accomplish something that matters to you? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do any of your SOs know about these plans? • If they did, would they take them seriously? How would they try to help?

■ Hope

	Client	Client's Significant Others
Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much hope do you have that your life can change? • How much hope do you have that therapy/medication/etc. could make a difference? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much hope do your SOs have about your life changing? • How much hope do your SOs have that therapy/medication/etc. could make a difference?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much do you want help in changing your thoughts/ behaviors/life circumstances? • What steps have you taken to initiate some kind of change? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have your SOs encouraged you to get help and change? • What steps have they taken to support you?

■ **Suicide Attempts / Significant Accomplishments**

	Client	Client's Significant Others
Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever attempted suicide? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have any of your SOs attempted/committed suicide? • How have they responded to your despairing thoughts and actions?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever attempted/ accomplished something really difficult/significant? What was it? How did you do it? • What talents and unique interests have you developed and pursued? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have any of your SOs helped you in attempting/ accomplishing something really difficult/significant? What have they done? • What difficult/significant things have your SOs attempted/ accomplished? • How have your SOs helped you in your development and pursuit of talents and interests?

■ **Weapons/Safety**

	Client	Client's Significant Others
Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have access to guns or other weapons? • Are you willing to remove them from your home? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do any of your SOs have guns or other weapons in their home? • Will they be willing to remove them?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have ways of protecting yourself and staying safe? • What are they? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which of your SOs can help protect you and keep you safe? • How are they able to do that?

■ **Hurting/Protecting**

	Client	Client's Significant Others
Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever physically hurt yourself? How? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have any of your SOs ever physically hurt themselves? How?
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever physically hurt someone else? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have they ever done anything that impelled you to hurt yourself? What? • Have any of your SOs ever physically hurt someone else?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever successfully not acted on an urge to hurt yourself or someone else? • How have you kept the urges from becoming actions? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have any of your SOs ever helped protect you from urges to hurt yourself or someone else? • How have they kept your urges from becoming actions?

■ **Psychiatric/Therapeutic Involvement**

	Client	Client's Significant Others
Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever seen a psychiatrist or therapist? • Did that person give you any diagnoses? • Do you know what the diagnoses were? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have any of your SOs seen a psychiatrist or therapist? • Do any of your SOs know about any diagnoses you've been given? • What was their reaction? • What do your SOs think of your psychiatrist/therapist?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you found previous psychiatrists/therapists helpful in your making changes? • How did they help? • How did you change? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have your SOs helped you in your work with previous psychiatrists or therapists?

■ **Hospitals and Sanctuaries**

	Client	Client's Significant Others
Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have ever been hospitalized? For what reason(s)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did any of your SOs agree that you needed to be hospitalized? • What did they do once you were admitted? Were they supportive?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever found it helpful to be hospitalized? How so? • Do you have experience with and/or access to sanctuaries—spiritual retreats or places of worship? • Have they been (or do you imagine they could be) helpful? How? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you know anyone else who has been helped by being hospitalized? How did it help? • What do your SOs think of such sanctuaries? • Have they been (or would they be) supportive of your going there?

■ **Moods**

	Client	Client's Significant Others
Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever had prolonged periods of feeling sad or guilty? • Do you ever lose interest in enjoyable activities? • Has your mood ever been unusually high or energetic, where you felt as if you didn't need to sleep? • Have you been feeling irritable or angry? • Have you been feeling nervous, tense, or anxious? • Do you worry a lot about stuff? • Have you ever felt sad, but at the same time felt as if you had too much energy and couldn't relax? • Has your mood been down or blue? • Have you ever had a panic attack—a time when your heart was pounding, you got dizzy and out of breath, or you thought you were having a heart attack? • Any difficulties sleeping? Eating too much or not enough? • Have you had low energy or difficulty concentrating? • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do any of your SOs struggle with their emotions—anger, anxiety, the blues? • How do they respond when you're having a hard time with your emotions? • Do they notice what's going on with you? • Does being around them change how you're feeling?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What have you found to be helpful when you're feeling down/angry/anxious/guilty? • What do you do at the time? • Have you ever sought treatment? Was it helpful? How? • Have you ever noticed times when your mood changed for the better—you felt calmer, lighter, more centered? What were you doing at the time or just before it happened? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever talked to any of your SOs about these bouts of feeling down/angry/anxious/guilty? Was it helpful? • Are any of your SOs effective at getting unstuck from troubling emotions? How do they do it? • Have any of your SOs ever helped you get to a better place? How did they do it?

■ **Altering Awareness**

	Client	Client's Significant Others
Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you drink? How often? How much? • Do you use drugs? Which ones? How often? • What have you been told about the dangers alcohol/drug abuse? • What's your take on these dangers? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do any of your SOs drink? How often? How much? • Do any of your SOs use drugs? Which ones? How often? • What do your SOs know about the dangers of alcohol/drug abuse? • Have any of your SOs ever warned you about these dangers? What do they say?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever succeeded in stopping drinking or using drugs? How did you do it? • Do you exercise? What do you do? How often? • Do you meditate? How often? • Do engage in any healing practices? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would any of your SOs help you if you were to decide to stop drinking/using drugs? • Are any of your SOs aware of your exercising/meditating/involvement in healing practices? Are they supportive of it?

■ **Voices/Visions**

■ Client		Client's Significant Others
Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever heard a voice or seen a vision that has told you to harm yourself or someone else? • Have you ever heard a voice or seen a vision that has frightened you in other ways? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do any of your SOs know about these experiences? What was their reaction when they found out? • Have you ever talked to a psychiatrist or therapist about these experiences? What did he or she say about them?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you been able to ignore or not take seriously a voice or vision that was telling you to harm yourself or someone else? How did you manage to do that? • Have you ever heard a voice or seen a vision that has calmed you down or helped you feel more grounded? • Have you ever heard a voice or seen a vision that you've recognized as spiritually significant? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have any of your SOs helped you to ignore or not take seriously a voice or vision that was telling you to harm yourself or someone else? How did they do that? • Do any of your SOs know about your experiences with the helpful voices/visions or about your spiritual experiences? • Have you ever talked to a psychiatrist or therapist about the helpful voices/visions or about your spiritual experiences? What did he or she say about them?

Suspicion/Trust

■ Client		Client's Significant Others
Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you ever find yourself not trusting other people? • What sorts of concerns do you have about them? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do your SOs have to say about your suspicions? • How trusting are they of you and others? • Do you feel more or less trusting of your SOs after talking with them?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you cope with the people you can't trust? • Who are you able to trust? • How do you tell the difference between people you can trust and those you can't? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are any of your SOs trustworthy? How do you know? • How do they help you tell the difference between trustworthy and untrustworthy people?

■ Lethargy/Activity

Client	Client's Significant Others
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Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much TV do you watch? What sorts of shows? • How much time do you spend surfing the web? Do you participate in chat rooms? What sorts? • Do you feel better or worse after watching TV or surfing the web? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much do your SOs watch TV and/or surf the web? • What do they say about your TV/web habits?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you read? What sorts of stuff? • Are you actively involved in physical/aesthetic/spiritual activities? Which ones? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o sports? o gardening? o performing/fine arts? o volunteer work? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are any of your SOs actively involved in physical/aesthetic/spiritual activities? Which ones? • What do they think about your involvements? • Do you ever do stuff like this together?

■ Abuse/Respect

	Client	Client's Significant Others
Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever been physically abused? When? • Have you ever been sexually abused? When? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have any of your SOs ever physically abused you? • Have any of your SOs ever sexually abused you?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever been physically comfortable with someone? • Have you ever been in a sexually respectful and satisfying relationship? • Have you ever felt a spiritual connection with someone? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have any of your SOs ever helped protect you from being physically or sexually abused? • Have any of your SOs been supportive of your good relationships?

■ Medical Conditions

	Client	Client's Significant Others
Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is your health? • Do you have any chronic or acute medical conditions? • Have you recently been tested for HIV and/or other STIs? • What were the results? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do any of your SOs have a chronic or acute medical condition? • Do they understand what you're going through?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How often do you exercise? • How's your eating/sleeping? • How effective is the treatment for your medical condition? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are any of your SOs supportive of your working with your doctor to get the help you need?

■ Sexual Orientation

	Client	Client's Significant Others
Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever experienced any conflict or confusion about your sexual orientation? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you able to talk with any of your SOs about your sexual orientation? • If they knew about your sexual orientation, how would they react? • Who would be most concerned or frightened?

Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you comfortable with your sexual orientation? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who have you been able to talk to about your sexual orientation? • Who has been the most helpful?
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■ Medications

	Client	Client's Significant Others
Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you currently taking any medications for anxiety, depression, or other psychological symptoms? Which ones? • Have you taken any in the past? Which ones? • What is it like for you to take them? • Have you experienced any side effects? How do you deal with them? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do your SOs know about your taking these medications? • What do they think about it?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have your medications helped you? How? • Does it help when you take them consistently? • Have there been periods of time when you have done fine without medication? • What is different about these times? • What did you do to make these times possible? • What does taking the medication mean to you? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have any of your SOs helped you to take your medications consistently? • Do any of your SOs help you communicate with your doctor when your medication isn't working or when you're experiencing side effects? • Would your SOs agree that there have been times when you haven't needed medication? • What have your SOs noticed about you during those times when you haven't needed medication? • How were they helpful during these times?

■ Relationships

	Client	Client's Significant Others
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Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you recently experienced the break-up of an important relationship? How did you react? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did your SOs react to your breakup?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have you kept going? • Are you involved in any new or renewed relationships? • In what ways do family/friends rely on you? • Do you have any pets? How important are they to you? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have your SOs helped you to keep going? • How have they supported you in your new relationships?

■ Pregnancies

	Client	Client's Significant Others
Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you/a partner had any unwanted or problematic pregnancies? When? • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If any of your SOs knew about your/a partner's unwanted or problematic pregnancy, how would they react? • Would they offer to help?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you/a partner had a desired/healthy pregnancy? When? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would your SOs react to a desired/healthy pregnancy? What would they offer to do?

■ School and Work

	Client	Client's Significant Others
Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you been experiencing any problems in school or at work? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do your SOs expect you to perform in school and/or at work? • How do they react when you're not doing well?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you experienced any successes in school or work? How did you do it? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have any of your SOs helped you through problems in school or work? How did they do it? • Have any of your SOs taken the pressure off you to perform at some predetermined level of excellence?

■ Finances

	Client	Client's Significant Others
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Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you been experiencing any financial problems? • How have you coped with such problems in the past? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have any of your SOs been experiencing financial problems? • Do they know about your financial situation? • If they did know, what would they say?
Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have you turned your financial situation around in the past? What steps did you take? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have any of your SOs been able to help you financially in the past? • What have they done? • What would it take for them to do something now?

Reference

Brown, G. K. (2002). A review of suicide assessment measures for intervention research with adults and older adults. www.nimh.nih.gov/suicideresearch/adultsuicide.pdf

