
Assessing and Managing Homicide Risk on the Inpatient Unit

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Responding to Threats of Homicide

When a patient threatens to kill someone, immediate action is necessary:

1. Evaluate the patient's intent, capability, and history of violence or aggression. Consider the specificity of the threat, including details about the potential victim and the plan.
2. Ensure the safety of the patient, staff, and others by implementing appropriate security measures within the unit.

Legal Considerations

- Familiarize yourself with your state's laws regarding the duty to warn and protect third parties. These laws often require healthcare professionals to take reasonable steps to warn identifiable victims of threats. (See Fact Sheet "How to Handle Tarasoff Obligations" for more detail.)
- While patient confidentiality is important, exceptions are made when there is an immediate threat to the safety of others. If you're not sure what to do, consult with the hospital risk management team.

Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation

- Ask about any history of violent behavior or previous threats.
- Assess for substance use, which can increase the risk of acting on homicidal ideations.
- Evaluate for symptoms that may contribute to homicidal thoughts, such as delusions, hallucinations, or severe impulsivity.
- Consider stressors or triggers that may increase the risk of violence.

Questions to Guide Assessment

- "Have you thought about harming others recently?"
- "Do you have a plan to harm someone? Can you tell me about it?"
- "What makes you feel like you want to hurt others?"
- "Have you ever acted on these thoughts before?"
- "What do you think might stop you from acting on these thoughts?"

Managing Homicide Risk

- Develop a detailed safety plan involving the patient, staff, and possibly the patient's family, focusing on de-escalation strategies and triggers for homicidal ideation.
- Medications can help to manage underlying psychiatric conditions or acute agitation—such as antipsychotics or mood stabilizers.
- Engage the patient in psychotherapy aimed at addressing violent ideation, improving impulse control, and developing coping strategies.
- If there is a credible threat, collaborating with law enforcement may be necessary, following legal guidelines and institutional policies.