

WARNING SIGNS FOR SUICIDE

Warning signs are defined as acute indications of elevated risk. In other words, they signal potential risk for suicidal behavior in the near future. Warning signs may be evident at intake or may arise during the course of treatment. Warning signs, which can be direct or indirect, always require asking follow-up questions.

Direct indications of acute suicidality are given the highest priority. They are:

- *Suicidal communication*: Someone threatening to hurt or kill him- or herself or talking of wanting to hurt or kill him- or herself.
- *Seeking access to method*: Someone looking for ways to kill him- or herself by seeking access to firearms, pills, or other means.
- *Making preparations*: Someone talking or writing about death, dying, or suicide when such topics are out of the ordinary for the person to address.

Each of the **direct** warning signs indicates potential for suicidal behavior in its own right and, if present, requires rigorous follow-up. **Indirect** warning signs, on the other hand, may or may not signal risk for acute suicidal behavior (e.g., substance abuse is the norm among your clients). In all cases, warning signs require follow-up questions to determine whether they indicate acute suicidality.

You may observe **indirect** warning signs in substance abuse clients who are not suicidal. Nonetheless, these warning signs are critical to follow up on to determine the extent to which they may signal acute risk for suicidal behavior. You can remember them by the mnemonic **IS**

PATH WARM:

- **I** = Ideation
- **S** = Substance abuse
- **P** = Purposelessness
- **A** = Anxiety
- **T** = Trapped
- **H** = Hopelessness
- **W** = Withdrawal
- **A** = Anger
- **R** = Recklessness
- **M** = Mood changes

Some of the IS PATH WARM warning signs are self-evident (e.g., substance abuse); others require brief explanation. “Purposelessness” refers to a lack of a sense of purpose in life or reason for living. “Trapped” refers to perceiving a terrible situation from which there is no escape. “Withdrawal” refers to increasing social isolation. “Anger” refers to rage, uncontrolled anger, or revenge-seeking. “Anxiety” is a broad term that refers to severe anxiety, agitation, and/or sleep disturbances. The phrase “mood changes” refers to dramatic shifts in emotions.

Warning signs are often in evidence following acute stressful life events. Among people who abuse substances, break-up of a partner relationship is most common. It is also important to look for warning signs in your clients when relapse occurs and during acute intoxication. Stressful life events include:

- Break-up of a partner relationship.
- Experience of trauma.
- Legal event.
- Job loss or other major employment setback.
- Financial crisis.
- Family conflict or disruption.
- Relapse.
- Intoxication.