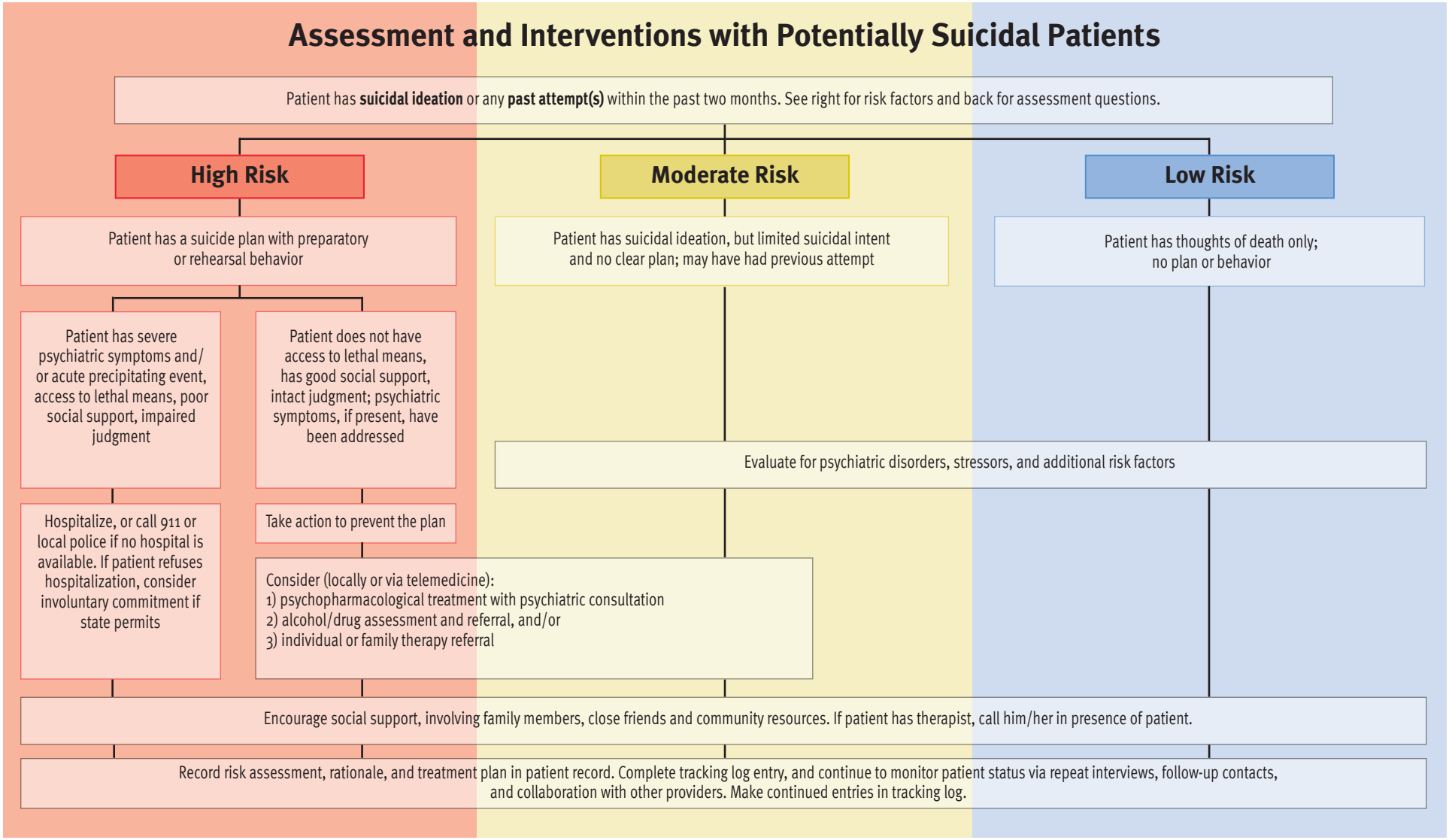
Assessment and Interventions with Potentially Suicidal Patients

A Guide for Primary Care Professionals

SPRC Suicide Prevention Resource Center

WICHE Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education
Mental Health Program



Suicide Risk and Protective Factors[1]

RISK FACTORS

- **Suicidal behavior:** history of prior suicide attempts, aborted suicide attempts or self-injurious behavior.
- **Family history:** of suicide, attempts, or psychiatric diagnoses, especially those requiring hospitalization.
- **Current/past psychiatric disorders:** especially mood disorders (e.g., depression, Bipolar disorder), psychotic disorders, alcohol/substance abuse, TBI, PTSD, personality disorders (e.g., Borderline PD).

  Co-morbidity *with other psychiatric and/or substance abuse disorders and recent onset of illness increase risk.*

- **Key symptoms:** anhedonia, impulsivity, hopelessness, anxiety/panic, insomnia, command hallucinations, intoxication. For children and adolescents: oppositionality and conduct problems.
- **Precipitants/stressors:** triggering events leading to humiliation, shame or despair (i.e., loss of relationship, financial, or health status – real or anticipated).
- **Chronic medical illness** (esp. CNS disorders, pain).
- **History of or current abuse or neglect.**

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Protective factors, even if present, may not counteract significant acute risk.

- **Internal:** ability to cope with stress, religious beliefs, frustration tolerance.
- **External:** responsibility to children or pets, positive therapeutic relationships, social supports.

Screening: uncovering suicidality[2]

- Other people with similar problems sometimes lose hope; have you?
- With this much stress, have you thought [are you thinking] of hurting yourself?
- Have you ever thought [are you thinking] about killing yourself?
- Have you ever tried to kill yourself or attempted suicide?

Assess suicide ideation and plans[3]

- Assess suicidal ideation – frequency, duration, and intensity
  - When did you begin having suicidal thoughts?
  - Did any event (stressor) precipitate the suicidal thoughts?
  - How often do you have thoughts of suicide? How long do they last?
  - How strong are the thoughts of suicide?
  - What is the worst they have ever been?
  - What do you do when you have suicidal thoughts?
  - What did you do when they were the strongest ever?
- Assess suicide plans
  - Do you have a plan or have you been planning to end your life? If so, how would you do it? Where would you do it?
  - Do you have the (drugs, gun, rope) that you would use? Where is it right now?
  - Do you have a timeline in mind for ending your life? Is there something (an event) that would trigger the plan?

Assess suicide intent

- What would it accomplish if you were to end your life?
- Do you feel as if you're a burden to others?
- How confident are you that your plan would actually end your life?
- What have you done to begin to carry out the plan? For instance, have you rehearsed what you would do (e.g., held pills or gun, tied the rope)?
- Have you made other preparations (e.g., updated life insurance, made arrangements for pets)?
- What makes you feel better (e.g., contact with family, use of substances)?
- What makes you feel worse (e.g., being alone, thinking about a situation)?
- How likely do you think you are to carry out your plan?
- What stops you from killing yourself?

Endnotes:

[1] SAFE-T pocket card. Suicide Prevention Resource Center & Mental Health Screening. (n/d).

[2] Stovall, J., & Domino, F.J. Approaching the suicidal patient. *American Family Physician*, 68 (2003), 1814-1818.

[3] Gliatto, M.F., & Rai, K.A. Evaluation and treatment of patients with suicidal ideation. *American Family Physician*, 59 (1999), 1500-1506.

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