


**Pamela H. Harmell, Ph.D.**  
**Suicide, Social Media, and Substance Abuse**



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Legal and Ethical Considerations

Section C

Suicide, Social Media and Substance Use

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Suicide, Social Media and Substance Use

- *Proper handling and assessment of suicide*
- *Interventions*
- *Contributing factors to suicide*
- *Insurance industry and diagnosis*
- *Cyber bullying*
- *Non Suicidal Self Injury (NSSI)*
- *Social media and suicide*
- *Opioids and suicide*

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Suicide and Proper Terminology  
Caruso, 2019



**Suicide and Terminology**

- ▶ *“Committed Suicide” is eliminated*
- ▶ *Criminals “commit” crimes*
- ▶ *Suicide is not a crime*
- ▶ *A much better term is: “Died by Suicide”*
  - ▶ *Kevin Caruso, Executive Director, Suicide.org*
- ▶ *Why suicide rates and statistics are invalid*
  - ▶ *Insurance*
  - ▶ *Stigma*

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Suicide Risk Interventions  
Firestone, 2019

[www.psychalive.org](http://www.psychalive.org)

What Therapist's Need to Know (about suicide)  
APA Education Directorate

<https://www.apa.org/education/ce/suicide.pdf>

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Suicide Risk Interventions  
Firestone, 2019

**1. Engage the Person**

- ▶ *Show you are paying attention*
- ▶ *Help the person feel accepted*
- ▶ *Maintain eye contact*
- ▶ *Sit forward, lean toward the person,*
- ▶ *Convey empathy*
- ▶ *Try to see and feel things from the person's perspective*

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Suicide Risk Interventions  
Firestone, 2019

**2. Identify if Person is Suicidal**

- ▶ *Ask if person is thinking about suicide*
- ▶ *Be direct but sensitive*
- ▶ *Encourage person to talk about suicidal thoughts or plans*

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Suicide Risk Interventions  
Firestone, 2019

**3. Assess for Suicide**  
**Potential Tool: SAD PERSONAS (more later)**

- ▶ Ask if the person has a plan
- ▶ “Have you thought of how you might kill yourself”? Is there a gun in the house? How soon are you planning to do it?
- ▶ Previous attempts
- ▶ Err on the side of caution

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Suicide Risk Interventions  
Firestone, 2019

**4. Develop and Document an Action Plan**

- ▶ Patient involvement in treatment planning
- ▶ Be specific
- ▶ Clarify how both are committed to the plan
- ▶ How you will apply the plan
  - ▶ Example: Likert scale; support system; meds

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Suicide Assessment  
Bongar & Sullivan, 2013, p. 106

*“No empirically validated suicide risk assessment procedure exists.”*

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Suicide Assessment  
Empirical Validation?

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**Runeson, et al, 2017, notes:**

*“Most suicide risk assessment instruments were supported by too few studies to allow for evaluation of accuracy. Among those that could be evaluated, none fulfilled requirements for sufficient diagnostic accuracy.” p. 2*

**Murray (2018) notes:**

*“Some experts recommend abandoning suicide risk assessment as it is so inaccurate.” p. 1*

**References:**

Runeson, B. et al, (2017). Instruments for the assessment of suicide risk: A systematic review evaluating the certainty of the evidence, PLoS One, online <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0180292>

Murray, D. (2018). Is it time to abandon suicide assessment? BJ Open, 2(1), e1-e2. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjpo.bp.115.002071>

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Suicide Assessment  
Empirical Validation

**Specific to the Columbia**

Claims are made that it has “evidence for prediction of suicide attempts” however there is no actual proof that the method is “evidence based.” However there are further studies that the Columbia is one of the best assessment methods. For further information, see

<http://cssrs.wpengine.com/the-columbia-scale-c-ssrs/evidence/>

For research on the Columbia see below

[https://cssrs.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/CSSRS\\_Supporting-Evidence\\_Book\\_2020-01-14.pdf](https://cssrs.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/CSSRS_Supporting-Evidence_Book_2020-01-14.pdf)

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Suicide Assessment  
Empirical Validation

**Conclusions**

The language is tricky: It does not conclude the measure is “evidence based” but certainly is “suitable.” These findings suggest that the C-SSRS is suitable for assessment of suicidal ideation and behavior in clinical and research settings.

**Conclusions**

These findings suggest that the C-SSRS is suitable for assessment of suicidal ideation and behavior in clinical and research settings.

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Suicide Assessment  
Empirical Validation?

**Bongar & Sullivan, 2013, p. 106:**  
“No empirically validated suicide risk assessment procedure exists.”

**Chu et al, 2015:**  
Empirically informed suicide risk assessment frameworks are useful  
... however, **it has not yet been empirically validated.**

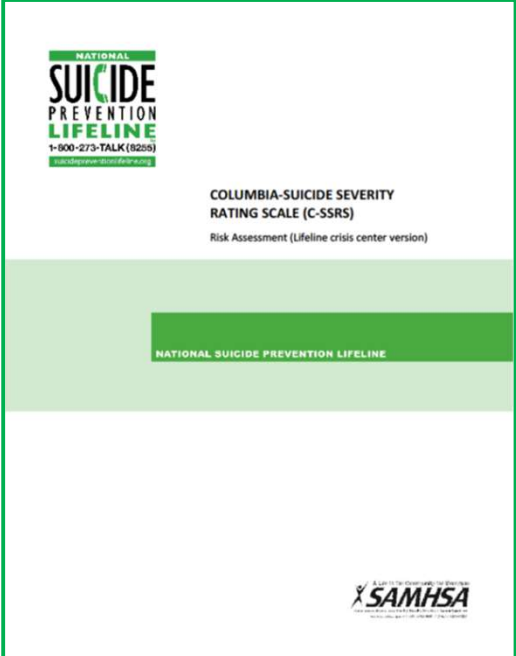
Chu et al. (2015). Routinized Assessment of Suicide Risk in Clinical Practice: An Empirically Informed Update. *J of Clin Psych, 71(12)*.  
DOI: [10.1002/jclp.22210](https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.22210)

➤ Columbia Assessment Tool: **“Evidence Supported”** →

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Columbia Suicide Severity Scale (2008)  
<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Suicide-Risk-Assessment-C-SSRS-Lifeline-Version-2014.pdf>  
**“EVIDENCE SUPPORTED”**



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Principles of Suicide Risk  
Granello, 2010

**Err On Side Of Caution**

- ▶ **False positives** are common and less dangerous
  - ▶ Assessment falsely shows person IS suicidal
- ▶ **False negatives** are dangerous
  - ▶ Assessment falsely shows person is NOT suicidal
- ▶ These errors can be fatal

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Suicide Assessment Factors  
Especially with Adults

**KNOW THE DIFFERENCE**

**WARNING SIGNS**

Episodic and Variable

- Mood, life events,
- Change from day to day

**RISK FACTORS**

Static and Enduring

- Age, demographics,
- Fam hx of suicide
- Do not change

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C-17 Assessment of Carmine... Post Hoc

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**S**<sub>(sex)</sub> YES

**A**<sub>(age)</sub> NO

**D**<sub>(depr)</sub> YES

**P**(previous attempt) NO

**E**(ethanol abuse) NO

**R**(rational thinking loss) NO

**S**(social support lacking) NO

**O**(organized plan) YES

**N**(no significant other) NO  
Minors; Negligent family

**A** – Access to Means YES

**S**(sickness) YES  
Minors: School problems

SAD PERSONS Scale (SPS)  
Patterson et al, 1983; Juhnke, 1994  
[Campbell, W. \(2004\). Revised SAD PERSONS helps assess suicide risk. Current Psychiatry, 3\(3\), 102.](#)

ADULTS  
Yes  
No

MINORS  
10 to Zero  
0 - 100

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*Adapted – SPS Juhnke, 1996*  
*Adapted for Children & Adolescents*

American Academy of Pediatrics  
DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™  
Pennsylvania Chapter



*Endorsed by American Academy of Pediatrics*  
*Intervention guidelines based upon*  
*total points received*  
*RANGE = 0 to 100*

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The Adapted SAD PERSONS:  
A suicide assessment scale  
Designed for use with  
children and adolescents

Endorsed by American Academy of  
Pediatrics, 2010

**FOR THOSE OF YOU WORKING WITH MINORS**

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Suicide and Risk Management  
Jobes, Rudd, Overholser, & Joiner (2008)

**Adequate Assessment**

*“If clinicians adequately assess suicide risk, have a suicide-specific treatment plan, consult with colleagues, and document their work, the prospect of being successfully sued for malpractice is significantly reduced.” (p. 407)*

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Legal and Ethical Issues

Therapist Self-Care  
HUMOR as self care

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*Suicide*

*Where do drug over-doses fit in?*  
*Further discussion upcoming*

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*Published 2018*  
*Statistics*

*American Foundation for Suicide Prevention*

*<https://afsp.org/about-suicide/suicide-statistics/>*

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American Foundation For Suicide Prevention AFSP - 2018  
<https://afsp.org/about-suicide/suicide-statistics/>

**Current Statistics AFSP  
UPDATED STATISTICS 2018**

Each year  
**44,965**  
Americans  
*Die By Suicide*

For Every Suicide  
**25**  
*Attempts*

Suicide Costs  
the US  
**\$69 Billion**  
Annually

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*Non-suicidal Self-Injury*

*NSSI*

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**CONDITION FOR FURTHER STUDY**

**Nonsuicidal Self-Injury**

D. The behavior is not socially sanctioned (e.g., body piercing, tattooing, part of a religious or cultural ritual) and is not restricted to picking a scab or nail biting.

E. The behavior or its consequences cause clinically significant distress or interference in interpersonal, academic, or other important areas of functioning.

F. The behavior does not occur exclusively during psychotic episodes, delirium, substance intoxication, or substance withdrawal. In individuals with a neurodevelopmental disorder, the behavior is not part of a pattern of repetitive stereotypies. The behavior is not better explained by another mental disorder or medical condition (e.g., psychotic disorder, autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, Lesch-Nyhan syndrome, stereotypic movement disorder with self-injury, trichotillomania [hair-pulling disorder], excoriation [skin-picking] disorder).

**READ pp. 923-4: R45.88 or Z91.52**

or cultural ritual) and is not restricted to picking a scab or nail biting.  
E. The behavior or its consequences cause clinically significant distress or interference in interpersonal, academic, or other important areas of functioning.  
F. The behavior does not occur exclusively during psychotic episodes, delirium, substance intoxication, or substance withdrawal. In individuals with a neurodevelopmental disorder, the behavior is not part of a pattern of repetitive stereotypies. The behavior is not better explained by another mental disorder or medical condition (e.g., psychotic disorder, autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, Lesch-Nyhan syndrome, stereotypic movement disorder with self-injury, trichotillomania [hair-pulling disorder], excoriation [skin-picking] disorder).

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**Changes to DSM-5-TR RELATED TO NSSI**

28 Published Online: 24 Feb 2022 <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.pn.2022.03.3.28>

**Q. How can the new ICD-10-CM codes for suicidal behavior and nonsuicidal self-injury be used?**

**READ PAGE 923-4: R45.88 or Z91.52**

**A.** Because suicidal behavior may be helpful to track or flag for clinical attention and care of individuals, ICD-10-CM codes are now available for use by any clinician and do not require a mental disorder diagnosis. The suicidal behavior ICD-10-CM codes can be used for individuals who have engaged in potentially self-injurious behavior with at least some intent to die as a result of the act. Evidence of intent to end their life can be explicit or inferred from the behavior or circumstances. A suicide attempt may or may not result in self-injury.

**The nonsuicidal self-injury ICD-10-CM codes can be used for individuals who have engaged in intentional self-inflicted damage to their body that is likely to induce bleeding, bruising, or pain (for instance, by cutting, burning, stabbing, hitting, or excessive rubbing) in the absence of suicidal intent.**

**These codes appear in the Section II chapter "Other Conditions That May Be a Focus of Clinical Attention"; conditions, behaviors, circumstances, and problems in this chapter do not represent mental disorders but can affect the diagnosis, course, prognosis, or care of a disorder**

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CONDITION FOR FURTHER STUDY

Nonsuicidal Self-Injury

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Proposed Criteria

A. In the last year, the individual has, on 5 or more days, engaged in intentional self-inflicted damage to the surface of his or her body of a sort likely to induce bleeding, bruising, or pain (e.g., cutting, burning, stabbing, hitting, excessive rubbing), with the expectation that the injury will lead to only minor or moderate physical harm (i.e., there is no suicidal intent).  
**Note:** The absence of suicidal intent has either been stated by the individual or can be inferred by the individual's repeated engagement in a behavior that the individual knows, or has learned, is not likely to result in death.

2. Prior to engaging in the self-harm, the individual has a sense of distress or discomfort that is difficult to control.

3. Thinking about self-injury that occurs frequently, even when it is not acted upon.

D. The behavior is not socially sanctioned (e.g., body piercing, tattooing, part of a religious or cultural ritual) and is not restricted to picking a scab or nail biting.

E. The behavior or its consequences cause clinically significant distress or interference in interpersonal, academic, or other important areas of functioning.

F. The behavior does not occur exclusively during psychotic episodes, delirium, substance intoxication, or substance withdrawal. In individuals with a neurodevelopmental disorder, the behavior is not part of a pattern of repetitive stereotypes. The behavior is not better explained by another mental disorder or medical condition (e.g., psychotic disorder, autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, Lesch-Nyhan syndrome, stereotypic movement disorder with self-injury, trichotillomania [hair-pulling disorder], excoriation [skin-picking] disorder).

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When does it all begin?

Rates of NSSI for girls and boys in 3rd, 6th, and 9th grade separately

Barrocas et al., 2012

Grade	Boys (%)	Girls (%)
3rd	~8.5	~7.0
6th	~6.5	~2.2
9th	~5.2	~19.0


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Predictors of Suicide  
Rensko, 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2011

**Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI)**

- ▶ *NSSI better predictor of suicide attempts than depression, BLPD, hopelessness*
  - ▶ *Clients performing NSSI can “accidentally” die by suicide*
  - ▶ *NSSI related to clients*
  - ▶ *Counter transference reactions to such patients...*
- 

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NSSI Research Article  
Rensko, 2017

**See Additional Research Document**

**Countertransference Reactions to a Suicidal Patient**

Mary-Catherine Rensko

**Published Online:** 26 Jan

2017 <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp-rj.2017.120106>

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Rensko, 2017; Peterson J, Freedenthal S, Sheldon C, Andersen R. Psychiatry (Edgmont). 2008 Nov;5(11):20-6.

**NSSI**

- ▶ *Nearly half of clients who engage in NSSI may not meet criteria for depression, anxiety, eating disorder, substance use disorder, or other major psychiatric disorders*
- ▶ *NSSI is a common **nonspecific psychiatric** symptom found in a variety of disorders as well as those without a specific psychiatric diagnosis*

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Awareness of CT with NSSI Clients  
Rensko, 2017; Peterson, et al. 2008

**Awareness of Counter-transference**

- ▶ *The interpersonal functions that NSSI sometimes serves challenges the therapeutic alliance.*
- ▶ *Clinicians experience a wide range of negative reactions to patients engaging in NSSI*
- ▶ *Terms such as “gamey, manipulative, attention-seeking, or borderline” are used by frustrated clinicians.*
- ▶ *These terms can indicate the need a **professional consultation***

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*No-Harm Agreement – yes or no*  
*Social Media and Suicide*  
*Opioids and Suicide*

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Recommended Suicide Interventions  
Hartwell-Walker, 2015; Bongar & Sullivan, 2013

**Use of Safety Agreement**

**(aka “No-Harm ~~Contract~~”) AGREEMENT**

1. Only use if you determine it has clinical value
2. Use affirmative statements from client:
  - “I want to battle this depression...”
  - “I know people care about me...”
3. Collaboratively with client

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Recommended Suicide Interventions  
Hartwell-Walker, 2015; Bongar & Sullivan, 2013

**Use of Safety Agreement**

*“Obtaining a suicide prevention ~~contract~~  
**AGREEMENT** establishes that the patient is at  
risk for suicide. It does not establish that suicide  
risk has been assessed.” p. 175*

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Recommended Suicide Interventions  
Hartwell-Walker, 2015; Bongar & Sullivan, 2013

**Use of Safety Agreement**

- *Widely used but overvalued*
  - *No real supporting evidence*
  - *Has no legal standing*
  - *No demonstrated protection from malpractice liability*
- *False sense of security*

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Social Media and Suicide  
Luxton et al, 2012; Hinduja & Patch, 2010

**Research**

- Survey given to 2000 young people
- Victims of cyberbullying
  - Two times more likely to attempt suicide
- Offenders who cyberbully
  - 1.5 times more likely to attempt suicide

**Conclusion: Cyberbullying and social media can increase the risk of suicide**

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Social Media and Suicide

**Primary Question:**  
Is there an association between social media and suicide rates

**Answer:**  
Prevalence of suicide is positively related to social media use

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Social Media and Suicide  
Luxton et al., 2012, p. 195

*“There is increasing evidence that the Internet and social media can influence suicide-related behavior.”*

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Social Media and Suicide  
Luxton et al., 2012; Shah, 2010

**Cyberbullying**

- AKA “Cyberbullicide”
- *Emailing*
- *Texting*
- *Facebook*
- *Imessage*

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Social Media and Increased Risk  
Luxton et al, 2012; Hinduja & Patch, 2010

**“Cyberbullicide”**

- *Cyberbullying / harassment*
- *Reminder from earlier slide:*
- *Victims = 2 times more likely to attempt suicide*
- *Offenders = 1.5 times more likely to attempt suicide*
  - *Feelings of isolation*
  - *Instability*
  - *Hopelessness*

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Social Media and Increased Risk  
Hinduja & Patch, 2010

**Cybersuicide Pacts**

- *Agreement between two or more people*
- *Difference: pact is between two strangers*
  - *Use of chat rooms*
  - *Virtual bulletin boards and forums*
  - *Unmediated avenue for like-minded vulnerable people*

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Social Media and Increased Risk  
The Economist, 2007

**Documented Online Suicide Pacts**

- *First reported event in Japan, 2000*
- *Currently more common*
  - *Increased from 34 in 2003 to 91 in 2005*
- *2007: Korea had highest suicide pact rates in the world*
- *U.S. has not kept statistics yet*

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Social Media and Increase Risk  
Luxton et al., 2012; Shah, 2010

**Cybersuicide**

- *Method to obtain “how-to” descriptions*
- *Unregulated on-line pharmacies*
  - *Outside U.S. no need for Rx*
  - *National Association of Boards of Pharmacy*
    - *Fight against unregulated online pharmacies*

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Social Media and Increase Risk  
Luxton et al., 2012; Shah, 2010

**Cybersuicide**

- *Message boards*
- *Use of hydrogen sulfide gas became well known*
- *Japan, 2008*
  - *220 Cases of attempted suicide*
  - *208 actually died by suicide*

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Social Media and Increase Risk  
Dunlop et al., 2011

**Media Contagion and Suicide**

- *Recent study*
- *719 individuals aged 14-24*
  - *79% reported exposure to content through family, newspapers*
  - *59% reported exposure to content through Internet sources*

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Social Media and Suicide  
National Association of Boards of Pharmacy, 2011

**Internet How-To Descriptions**

- *Unregulated on-line pharmacies*
- *Sell drugs without a prescription*
- *Message boards and forums give instructions*

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Social Media and Suicide  
Website Monitoring, 2010

**Video Sharing**

- *Showing self-harm and suicide*
- *May “normalize” suicide and NSSI (more next slides)*
- *Research:*
  - *Using keywords: “self-injury” or “self-harm” to search*
  - *Top videos had more than 2 million viewers*
    - *58% had no restriction for who could view*

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Social Media and Suicide  
Luxton et al., 2012

**Legal Issues**

- *Complexities associated with privacy*
  - *Monitoring and filtering content on Internet sites*
  - *Debate about who should be responsible for monitoring*
  - ***Issues about freedom of speech and First Amendment rights***
- *Conclusion*
  - *Internet is an “open gateway”*
  - *Very few restrictions on content or who can access*

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Social Media and Suicide  
Luxton et al., 2012, p. 195

***Conclusion once again:***

***“There is increasing evidence that the Internet and social media can influence suicide-related behavior.”***

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Opioid Use Disorders and Suicide  
Bohnert et al, 2017

**33,000 opioid deaths in 2015**

- ▶ Prescription drugs, heroin, fentanyl (synthetic opioid)
- ▶ Many are NOT accidental

*“A diagnosis of any current SUD and the specific current diagnoses of alcohol, cocaine, cannabis, opioid, amphetamine and sedative use disorders were all associated significantly with increased risk of suicide for both males and females.” (p. 1193)*

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Opioid Use Disorders and Suicide  
Bohnert et al, 2017

**Research:**

- ▶ 5 million veterans
- ▶ Diagnosis of Opioid Use Disorder (OUD)
- ▶ Increased the risk of suicide
  - ▶ Males = 2 times greater risk
  - ▶ Females = 8 times greater risk

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Opioid Use Disorders and Suicide  
Bohnert et al, 2017

**Research 2014 Study:**

- ▶ *41,053 participants in general population*
- ▶ *Prescription opioid use associated with 40-60% increased risk of suicide*
- ▶ *Weekly opioid use increased risk of completed suicide by 75%*
- ▶ *Attempted suicide at rate of 200% greater than non opioid users in study*

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Opioid Use Disorders and Suicide  
Bohnert et al, 2017

**Research Conclusions:**

- *People with OUD are highly stigmatized*
- *Feel undeserving of treatment*
- *When hopelessness eventually sets in suicide may seem like only option*

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Sum Up Question

*“No empirically validated suicide risk assessment procedure exists.”*

**ANSWER:**

TRUE

FALSE

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Sum Up Question

*What does the current literature suggest is the strongest predictor of teen suicide attempts (separate from drugs)?*

**ANSWER:**

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## Sum Up Questions

*What is the difference between “risk factors” and “warning signs” in the assessment of suicidality?*

**ANSWER:**

**Risk Factors:**

**Warning Signs:**

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## Sum Up Questions

*Which “error” in dangerousness assessment is more dangerous to the patient?*

**ANSWER:**

*FALSE  
POSITIVE*

*FALSE  
NEGATIVE*

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