

FAMILY MENTAL HEALTH

Lessons & Activities

Reducing Access to Lethal Means

“Reducing access to lethal means, such as firearms and medication, can determine whether a person at risk for suicide lives or dies.”
—Suicide Prevention Resource Center

Purpose: This lesson will teach the importance of reducing access to lethal means and how family members can do that before and during times of crises.

Parent Pre-reading

The majority of suicide prevention efforts focus on why people turn to suicide. However, how a person attempts suicide can determine whether that person dies by suicide or not. Much like how parents baby-proof a house when children come along, parents need to make sure their home is free from access to lethal means. Reducing access to lethal means is called means reduction. Lethal means can be methods such as guns (a very important one to restrict, especially since guns used in youth suicides usually belong to a parent), drugs, and other substances that are commonly used in suicide attempts and typically prove fatal. Removing lethal means is especially important of households that include individuals who are struggling with suicidal thoughts.

Means reduction is a crucial strategy to suicide prevention. It keeps lethal means out of reach of individuals who may be in a short-term crisis. No matter the level of an individual's intent for suicide, they are more likely to survive an attempt because lethal means are not within reach. In fact, 90% of individuals who attempt suicide do not end up dying by suicide later. If they don't have access to lethal means to begin with, even those who attempt suicide with nonlethal means can survive and recover. Reducing access to lethal means reduces that risk for suicide and will therefore save lives.

Some ideas to reducing access to lethal means include the following:

Medication

- Use individual pill packets
- Avoid storing large quantities of medication, if possible
- Keep medications locked
- Properly dispose of unused medication
 - » For help with ways to do this, visit <https://www.fda.gov/drugs/resourcesforyou/consumers/buyingusingmedicinesafely/ensuringsafeuseofmedicine/safedisposalofmedicines/ucm186187.htm>

Guns

- Avoid storing guns in the house, if possible
- Store guns in a locked safe
- Store ammunition somewhere separate from the gun
- Remove guns temporarily from the house if someone is struggling
 - » Consider storing your gun at a friend's house, shooting club, or police precinct until the person recovers

Alcohol and Drugs

- Store alcohol in a locked location where kids won't be able to access it
- Keep drugs out of the house

Preparation

Read the activity provided and discuss together as parents how you want to carry out the activity to best suit the needs of your family.

Preview the video that goes along with this lesson.

Optional: Have a copy of *There's Only One You!: A Gun Safety Book for Children* by Ryan M. Cleckner available to read with your family.

Lesson

One risk factor of suicide is access to lethal means. The greater access someone has to lethal means, the greater chance he or she has of using that method in crises. Reducing access to lethal means is an effective strategy in suicide prevention. Lethal means refers to methods that are almost always permanent. Examples of lethal means include guns, medications, and drugs and alcohol.

If you are having suicidal thoughts, tell someone! Others can help keep you in a safe place and help remove any lethal means that may be nearby. If you suspect someone else may be having suicidal thoughts, ask the person about it. If the person is having a hard time, tell an adult and stay with the person, keeping the person away from anything that could be used as a lethal means. Never leave a struggling individual alone. Wait until someone can come help.

Adapting for Younger Children

Summarize the lesson in a few simple sentences that your child can understand.

To help your child better understand the lesson, you could read *There's Only One You!: A Gun Safety Book for Children* by Ryan M. Cleckner. It's a story about two kids named Jack and Alice who learn what to do if they see a gun. Some questions you could ask and points you could go over after reading the story include the following:

- Why is gun safety important?
- What can you do to stay safe around guns?

Activity

Even if no one in your household is struggling, you can start now to keep family members safe. Here are a few suggestions: Decide as a family how medications will be distributed (for example, asking a parent's permission). If there are guns in the home, make a gun safety plan. The plan can include what to do if a gun is left out, who gets to handle the gun, etc.

Video

This video talks about the importance of locking up guns in the home. Parents, after watching the video, it is important to explain to your children that there are healthy responses to problems. If they do start having thoughts about stealing medication or picking up a gun, they should immediately tell their parents instead of letting those thoughts circulate. Be sure they understand that even though many teens are impulsive, not every teen jumps right to thoughts of suicide.

<https://vimeo.com/232528101>

References

Harvard Injury Control Research Center, “Means Matter.” Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Retrieved from <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/>.

Prevention Lane, “Lethal Means Restriction.” Posted Nov. 29. 2018. Retrieved from <https://preventionlane.org/suicide-lethal-means-restriction>.

Suicide Prevention Resource Center, “CALM: Counseling on Access to Lethal Means.” Retrieved from <https://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/calm-counseling-access-lethal-means>.

Suicide Prevention Resource Center, “Reduce Access to Means of Suicide.” Retrieved from <https://www.sprc.org/comprehensive-approach/reduce-means>.

Additional Resources

The following are just a few of the websites, numbers, and apps that provide convenient information about suicide prevention. Click on the icon to find out more about the resource.

