

Suicide Assessment Interview Strategies

Maintaining a caring, empathic and nurturing stance with a client during an assessment interview for suicide risk will not only be therapeutic, but will more likely yield the database from which conclusions about suicide risk can be drawn. **In addition, there are ways that assessment questions can be asked that encourage clients to be more open about their suicidal thoughts, feelings, urges, behavior.** Here are a few strategies that you might find useful*:

Normalization: This approach gives permission for the client to feel or act in certain ways because it is understandable and normal given the circumstances that they are facing. For example, “Many teenagers who have lost an important relationship feel that life just isn’t worth living. Do you feel that way?”

Gentle Assumption: Behavior is assumed in this approach. “Have you thought about how your death would affect your parents?” is better asked as “You likely have thought about your parents. “In what ways did you think your death will affect your Mom and Dad?”

Shame Attenuation: Questions give credit to the client’s motives and point of view as a strategy to find out what actually happened. Rather than asking “What complaints does your Mother have?” ask “In what way does your Mother make life difficult for you?”

Symptom Amplification: This approach assumes behaviors occurred and uses overestimation so that the client will provide a true estimate of activity. Don’t ask “Have you been thinking of suicide?” Overestimate by asking “How many hours have you spent thinking of suicide this week?” Twenty or thirty?”

*These strategies are summarized from “The Practical Art of Suicide Assessment” by Shawn C. Shea, M.D.

To see an interview with Dr. Shea where he discusses his methodology for creating effective suicide assessment interview strategies, go to the following web address:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCqjLCR5mEs>