

To: All Providers
From: PerformCare
Date: January 3, 2025
Subject: Suicide Prevention #21: The Three- Step Theory of Suicide

For January's communication on treatment and management of chronic suicidal thinking PerformCare would like to introduce and review an evidenced based clinical theory. This theory is offered to enhance risk assessment and treatment processes for your clinical practices related to suicide. The Three Step Theory (3-ST) was originally conceptualized in 2015 by Klonsky and May. Since this time, it has been validated and incorporated into numerous suicide clinical trainings and treatment models. It is taught as a component of the Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Suicide Prevention model but is also a component of multiple trainings for continuing education, gatekeeper trainings, and publications. It is considered a valuable evidenced based tool for conceptualizing a person's capacity for suicide.

This "actionable" theory describes suicide capacity/risk according to four factors. They are pain, hopelessness, capacity, and connection. This theory can be used for providers when conceptualizing risk and developing treatment goals. It posits that suicide risk for an individual must include the experience of pain (typically unrelenting psychological pain). But, while psychological pain is required, this may not be sufficient to move a person toward the act of taking their life. The person must also possess a sense of hopelessness and the capacity to take their life. Capacity to take one's life refers both practical capability (access to means), acquired capacity, such as through genetic predispositions, and a personal disposition to be able to tolerate pain and be de-sensitized to the notion of their own death. All three components together can be mediated by connection. A person's connection to others or something meaningful to them, which provides a sense of purpose and belonging can mitigate the risk associated with pain, hopelessness and capacity.

This theory is useful in both conceptualizing risk and addressing treatment interventions according to the four factors. Providers may consider this theory under any model of treatment they espouse and in their treatment of clients with chronic suicidal thinking.

References

Klonsky, D.E., & May, A.M. (2015). The three-step theory (3ST): A new theory of suicide rooted in the "ideation-to-action" framework. *International Journal of Cognitive Therapy, 8 (2)*, 114-129

Klonsky E.D., Pachkowski M.C, Shahnaz A., & May A,M (2019). The three-step theory of suicide: Description, evidence, and some useful points of clarification. *Prev Med. 2021 Nov;152*

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