

SPRC Training Institute

Assessing and Managing Suicide Risk: Core Competencies for Mental Health Professionals

SPRC Training Institute announces a new one-day workshop for mental health professionals and employee assistance professionals. The workshop focuses on competencies that are core to assessing and managing suicide risk and is a collaboration of the [American Association of Suicidology](#) and the Suicide Prevention Resource Center.

We drew on the expertise of some of the nation's most [prominent leaders](#) in the field, including Shawn Shea, M.D., well-known author on the subject of suicide assessment. According to Dr. Shea, "The workshop is designed to meet the needs of care providers across the entire professional spectrum. The course is equally useful whether you are a psychiatrist, a licensed counselor, a social worker, an employee assistance professional-literally any practicing behavioral health specialist."

Lloyd Potter, PhD, SPRC's Director, said, "The Training Institute envisions making the course available in every part of the country over the coming months and years." In the first nine months, SPRC's Training Institute has scheduled 90 workshops in communities across the country and abroad. Workshops are offered in a format suitable for all mental health professionals and in tailored formats for either university and college counseling center staff or employee assistance professionals. This training is key to advancing our [National Strategy for Suicide Prevention](#), released by Surgeon General David Satcher in 2001.

Workshops in Your Community

You can advance the National Strategy in your state or community by [sponsoring](#) a workshop. SPRC staff can help you plan every aspect of the workshop from financing to satisfaction surveys. Our [faculty](#) of leading experts represent diversity in their professional backgrounds and training, as well as geographic location, race, and culture. Special training on the curriculum combined with their depth of experience as clinicians and trainers, ensures each workshop is a top quality training experience.

Do Professionals Really Need More Training?

Behavioral health professionals have a crucial role in preventing suicides. In the U.S. alone, over 30,000 people die by suicide each year, the equivalent of one major airliner filled with passengers crashing every two days. Three-quarters of these deaths are among working-aged adults. A number of studies report that a substantial proportion of people who died by suicide had either been in treatment or had some recent contact with a mental health professional. Many had been diagnosed with a psychiatric illness at the time of death as cited in *The National Strategy*¹. Additionally, hundreds of thousands of people show up in hospital emergency departments each year for treatment after a suicide attempt. "The sheer magnitude of this human tragedy cries out for an urgent response. This response includes training for mental health professionals," stated Dr. David Litts, Associate Director at SPRC.

A study of 292 psychologists relatively new in their careers found that virtually all had worked with suicidal clients, 29.1 % had clients who attempted suicide, and 11.3% had experienced a client suicide³ (Kleespies, P. M., Penk, W. E., & Forsyth, J. P. 1993). Sixty percent of those who had a client die by suicide had this experience during internship. There is no reason to believe these experiences would be unique to psychologists.

Clients' suicidal behaviors are a reality for mental health therapists and the source of significant distress for them. Yet, as a group, mental health professionals are "not adequately trained to provide proper assessment, treatment, and management of suicidal patients."² It is not surprising that professionals have been calling for increased formal training in this area for decades.

What is special about this workshop?

One unique feature of this curriculum is the way it was [developed](#). "This course began with a consensus process among leading clinician-researchers. Their first task was to establish the [core competencies](#) for effectively assessing

suicide risk, planning treatment, and managing the ongoing care of the at-risk patient," explained Dr. Alan Berman, Executive Director of AAS. "After identifying 24 key competencies, the expert task force determined what they believed to be the best way to train those in a single day *and* meet the ambitious learning [objectives](#)."

The course recognizes that complex ethical issues must be considered when providing care to suicidal clients and weaves threads of these discussions throughout the curriculum. Additionally, the course introduces the principles of The Chronological Assessment of Suicide Events (CASE), an innovative method for eliciting suicidal ideation.

The result is an engaging mixture of lecture, video demonstrations, and exercises that leave clinicians more *knowledgeable* and *confident* when faced with suicidal clients. Participants rate this workshop very highly and in overwhelming portions said they would recommend it to their peers.

What participants say. . .

"I feel that if I had a client walk into my office tomorrow, that I would at least have the confidence to be able to effectively assess the risk and protective factors, while understanding my limitations."

".very helpful and practical information. Well organized information that will be easily referenced."

"I particularly liked the use of different techniques throughout the day (role plays, lecture, Q & A, video.) The manual will be an invaluable resource during practice."

".I have a better idea of things I should be looking for."

"Good information to have for anyone who might come into contact with clients at risk, which is *anyone* working with clients."

Workshop Components

- Pre-workshop reading (about 20 pages)
- 6.5 hours of face-to face training, comprised of an engaging mixture of lecture and exercises
- Training DVD in eight segments, highlighting competencies taught. Four of the segments are "live" demonstrations of a clinical interview between master clinician and researcher, David Jobes, Ph.D., and a professional actor.
- Over 110 pages of Participant Manual with an extensive bibliography organized by subject.
- Journaling spread through the day, allowing participants to reflect on their reactions to the course and to set goals for improving their practice and studying the topic further.
- Q & A and discussion.
- Awarding of CEUs (determined individually at each delivery site).

Acknowledgment

The Suicide Prevention Resource Center is a funded project of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Promoting a mental health workforce that is better qualified to practice culturally competent mental health care based on evidence-based practices is one of the commitments of SAMHSA and a key to fully implementing the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention.

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¹ Pirkis & Burgess, 1998; Conwell & Brent, 1995; Robins, 1981

²National Strategy for Suicide Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, 2001, p. 79.

³Kleespies, P. M., Penk, W. E., & Forsyth, J. P. (1993). The stress of patient suicidal behavior during clinical training: Incidence, impact, and recovery. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 24, 293-303.