

DBI Tool 9: Practitioner Guidance Notes

SAFETY PLAN

What is this tool?

The aim of the safety plan tool is to prevent people from acting on their thoughts of self-harm or suicide. Within the safety plan people are asked to think of triggers or warning signs that a crisis may be escalating and to identify actions they can take to stop them from acting on their thoughts.

Who is this tool for?

This is for people who are experiencing thoughts of self-harm or suicide. However, it should not be used with people who are at imminent risk of suicide. Someone at imminent risk of suicide could be anyone who is unable to keep themselves safe in the moment. At this time the emergency services should be contacted, and your organisation's standard operating procedures and policies should be followed.

Safety plans can also be used with adults and younger people. However, they should not be used with people who have cognitive impairments.

How can this tool help?

A safety plan can help remind people that there are things they can do other than acting on their thoughts of suicide. The plan should be tailored to the individual and the main goal is to prevent someone from engaging in self-harm and/or suicidal behaviours.

When can I use this tool?

It is crucial that you offer to complete a safety plan with anyone who is experiencing self-harm and/or suicidal thoughts and feelings. It is also important that the safety plan is completed collaboratively, compassionately, and sensitively together with the person in distress and the DBI Practitioner.

If the DBI practitioner is filling out the safety plan for the person in distress (with the person in distress present and engaging in the safety plan) then the DBI Practitioner can use communication skills such as active listening to ensure the safety plan is accurate. The safety plan should also be updated whenever required but this should be discussed with the DBI practitioner and the person in distress.

If a person is unsure about completing a safety plan you can explain to them what a safety plan is and how it could be useful for them using the information above. It is like an emergency response plan. You could also reinforce that a safety plan is there to help keep them safe in the future.

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A safety plan could be useful for you if you are experiencing thoughts of self-harm and/or suicide. Sometimes if people experience thoughts of self-harm and suicide it can be difficult to think in the moment of actions you can take to keep yourself safe. By completing the safety plan, you will have a plan in place for what you can do when you feel as though you are in crisis.

The safety plan consists of six steps you can take to keep yourself safe. When you are using the safety plan you can follow the steps in order (from 1-6). However, you may find it helpful to skip parts of it or go between the different steps.

When you are creating the safety plan think about the barriers or obstacles you might face with each of your answers. For example, in step 4 where it asks who you can ask for help. It may be helpful to think about you may do if someone isn't able to answer the phone. Who else could you speak to, what would you do then? As the safety plan is there to keep you safe when you are in crisis, it is important that you think about what you would do in these situations as the main goal is to keep you safe.

Tips:

- It's helpful to use the safety plan when there are triggers or warning signs that a crisis may be developing. This is step 1 of the safety plan so you will have a chance to note this down. Within the safety plan there are lines where you can write your responses.
- It also may be useful to print out your safety plan and keep it somewhere easily accessible or you may want to keep a photo of it on your phone. The important thing is that it is accessible to you when you may need it.
- You can also update your safety plan whenever you see fit. For example, if one of the places that provides a distraction for you is the local park, but you are unable to gain access to this due to construction work then it is helpful to think of where else you could go to provide a distraction and update the safety plan accordingly.

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On this page there is a brief overview and some examples of each step of the safety plan to help you to understand how you can best complete the safety plan.

1. Warning signs

In this section you can think about triggers or warning signs that a crisis may be developing. This could be a mood, thought, situation or behaviour. Try to think about the last 24 hours leading up to a crisis. What happened? What were you thinking? How were you feeling?

Example: I feel as though I am not progressing in work and my relationships are failing.

2. Internal coping strategies

You can use this section to think about what you can do to take your mind off thinking about the situation. Have a think about what you do day-to-day that you find interesting. Or what you do to unwind. It is important that you have access to the coping strategies that you choose to include in your safety plan.

Example: Taking the dog to the park, baking, cleaning the house, watching Netflix, listening to music.

Try to be as specific as possible e.g., what park could you go to with the dog or what genre of music could you listen to?

3. People and social settings that provide a distraction

Within this section you could think about who you could contact or where you could go to distract you. This doesn't necessarily mean you would be asking this person for help. This could be someone or a place that distracts you or someone you enjoy speaking to or somewhere you enjoy visiting. There is a space for you to add in their phone numbers which could make it easier if you do not have access to their numbers at the time you are using your safety plan. Don't worry if you have only included one person, this is fine. The most important point is that the people and places you have included are realistic.

Example: Speaking to my best friend Jane, going shopping, or sitting in my garden.

4. People who I can ask for help

Within this section you are thinking about people whom you could directly ask for help. This could mean telling the person that you are struggling and asking for their help. Think about people who have helped you in the past, do you think you could speak to them again? Or is there anyone else you could ask for help that you maybe haven't asked for help before?

Within this section it is vital that you consider if you are experiencing a crisis late at night, who would pick up the phone? If your desired person doesn't answer, then who else could you contact?

Example: During the week I could call my mum as she always answers her phone but at the weekend she works. At the weekend I could call my sister as she always picks up the phone and is up late during night.

You could also share your safety plan with the people you have noted in sections 3 and 4. However, this is at your own discretion and it's important that you feel comfortable sharing it.

5. Professionals or services I can contact during a crisis

Within this section you can note down organisations you can contact during a crisis. You may have support from a CPN, so you could note their number down. You can think of professionals or services you have contacted in the past or perhaps services that you have heard of that you could call. There may also be services in your local area that can provide support that you may not be aware of.

6. Making the environment safe

The final section is trying to understand how you could make your environment safer. If you have thought of a way in which you could harm yourself, you could try to disarm the plan you have.

Example: Removing alcohol from the home as when you drink alcohol you experience thoughts of suicide. Or removing non-prescribed or excess medication from the home and giving it to someone else.

If you have not thought of a way in which you could harm yourself, it still may be useful to hide medication or any objects from your home that you could harm yourself with.

These six steps do not have to be followed in order, you can move between them as you see fit as the plan is for your own safety. If you feel as though your thoughts are becoming overwhelming and you don't find your coping strategies helpful, it may be useful to seek help immediately as the primary goal is to keep you safe.

Have a go at completing the safety plan on the following page and you can refer to this information to help you.

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Step 1: Warning signs (thoughts, mood, situation, behaviour) that a crisis may be developing

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Step 2: Internal coping strategies - things I can do to take my mind off my problems (relaxation, activity)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Step 3: People and social settings that provide a distraction

1. Name _____ Phone _____

2. Name _____ Phone _____

3. Place _____ 4. Place _____

Step 4: People who I can ask for help

1. Name _____ Phone _____

2. Name _____ Phone _____

3. Name _____ Phone _____

Step 5: Professionals or services I can contact during a crisis

1. Contact Name _____ Phone _____

Emergency contact number _____

2. Contact Name _____ Phone _____

Emergency contact number _____

3. Crisis services phone _____

Crisis services address _____

4. Helpline support (freephone): Samaritans 116 123 Breathing Space 0800 83 85 87

Step 6: Making the environment safe

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

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Safety plan tip: It is vital to take a person-centred approach and try to ensure the actions the person sets out are in their own words and are realistic for them. Ultimately, people should feel they have ownership over their safety plan.

Step 1: Warning signs (thoughts, mood, situation, behaviour) that a crisis may be developing

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

In step 1 ask the person to reflect back and think about what thoughts, moods, situations or behaviours they have noticed when they begin to feel suicidal.

For step 2, ask the person to think of strategies they can use independently without the support from others. It is useful for the person to think of strategies that are easily accessible to them regardless of their location or time of day.

Step 2: Internal coping strategies - things I can do to take my mind off my problems (relaxation, activity)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Step 3: People and social settings that provide a distraction

1. Name _____ Phone _____
2. Name _____ Phone _____
3. Place _____ 4. Place _____

In section 3 the person can try to identify people and places which can act as a distraction to suicidal thoughts/urges. It is not necessary for the contacts to know about their thoughts/feelings, they are only noted down as distractions from the thoughts/urges.

Safety plan tip: Encourage the person to avoid noting people or places that are unhelpful or that could make things worse such as places where alcohol/drugs are consumed or gambling settings.

Step 4 involves asking the person to write down contact information for people who they would feel comfortable talking to about suicidal thoughts/feelings. It is important that the people noted down in this section are trusted and safe to speak to in a time of crisis.

Safety plan tip: It is important to remember that not everyone has access to personal/social support. Therefore, the safety plan should be completed with compassion and sensitivity.

Step 4: People who I can ask for help

1. Name _____ Phone _____

2. Name _____ Phone _____

3. Name _____ Phone _____

Step 5: Professionals or services I can contact during a crisis

1. Contact Name _____ Phone _____

Emergency contact number _____

2. Contact Name _____ Phone _____

Emergency contact number _____

3. Crisis services phone _____

Crisis services address _____

4. Helpline support (freephone): Samaritans 116 123 Breathing Space 0800 83 85 87

Within step 5 the person can note down professionals and agencies they can contact when suicidal thoughts start to develop. It is important for this section to be realistic, for example if a person does not find a particular professional or service to be useful then other professionals or services should be explored.

Safety plan tip: It is important at each stage to check whether there are any barriers to the person in distress utilising each step. If there are barriers then ask the person to think about how these can be overcome. It is also important to check what the likelihood is that the person will use each strategy during a crisis as the safety plan should be realistic and tailored to the individual.

Step 6: Making the environment safe

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____



For the final section, you can introduce this by discussing with the person what they may use to hurt themselves when experiencing a suicidal crisis. You could also explore the availability of these means and how their environment could be made safer. For example, restricting access to means, removing items from the home, asking someone to look after their medication, taking a different route home.

Safety plan tip: The more detailed this section, the more likely the individual will be able to stick to it and ultimately keep themselves safe.

Acknowledgement

O'Connor, R. C. (2021). *When It Is Darkest: Why People Die by Suicide and What We Can Do to Prevent It*. Publisher: Vermilion