

Discussion aid: Assessing key signs and symptoms of risk of harm, and functional impairments

Use the following list of signs, symptoms, and behaviours commonly associated with risk and functional impairment. The presence of any of the following behaviours warrants further exploration and investigation. Also included is a patient discussion aid to help PCPs investigate the impact on several functional domains.^{1,2} These prompts will help primary care providers understand the impact of the identified signs, symptoms and behaviours commonly associated with risks and functional impairments, as outlined in Section A of [Keeping Your Patients Safe tool](#).

Assessing risk of harm to self or others²

Key signs and symptoms

Screen for the presence of any of the following key signs, symptoms, and behaviours commonly associated* with risks and functional impairments.

Cognition

- Impaired memory
- Impaired reasoning and/or judgment
- Impaired concentration
- General or command hallucinations
- Delusions
- Suicidal ideation
- Homicidal ideation

Feeling & Mood

- Prolonged negative mood (e.g. feelings of hopelessness, guilt, shame, irritability)
- Emotional extremes (highs and lows)
- Excessive fears, worries and anxieties
- Strong feelings or frequent outbursts of anger
- Apathy or inability to experience pleasure

Behaviour & Daily Functioning

- Decreasing ability for self-care
- Dramatic changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Self-harm behaviours (e.g., cutting, not eating)
- Growing inability to cope with daily problems and activities
- Alcohol and/or other substance abuse
- Changes in ability to manage responsibilities (e.g., work, finances, dependents)
- Social withdrawal
- Increasing number of interpersonal conflicts
- Impulsive behaviours (e.g., excessive spending, reckless driving, risky sexual behaviour, inappropriate outbursts)
- Defiance of authority and/or illegal activities

Other

- Numerous unexplained physical ailments

*The predictive risk for each of the above has yet to be validated. Therefore, probe and use clinical judgment to determine associated risks. It is better to overestimate than underestimate the magnitude of risk in situations of ambiguity or uncertainty.

Assessing functional impairments²

1. Personal Care

Often when people are not feeling well they find it difficult to care for themselves. Many people feel embarrassed about admitting the struggle they are having but it is normal under the circumstances. Some people have reported difficulty with common struggles – do any of these apply to you?

- Difficulty showering or bathing yourself?
- Difficulty preparing meals, or eating things that require minimal preparation, or even stop eating altogether?
- Difficulty getting dressed or changing your clothing, or wearing the same clothes 24 hours per day for days and weeks?
- Difficulty in going to medical appointments or taking medications that are helpful to you?

Another area of self care that is common for people to struggle with when not feeling well is meeting responsibilities. The next few questions I am going to ask you are about common responsibilities that many people find difficult to maintain:

- Paying rent or bills on time or even at all, despite having the money?
- Performing simple home maintenance like replacing light bulbs, cleaning the house or doing the dishes?
- Doing grocery shopping or shopping for other necessities?

2. Dependents

Often when people are not feeling well they find it difficult to care for their children, pets or other dependents in their usual ways. Many people feel guilty or ashamed about admitting the struggle they are having but it is normal under the circumstances. The next few questions I am going to ask you are about common difficulties that many people have reported in caring for others that depend on them:

- Who depends on you?
- Difficulty in feeding your children, pets or other dependents?

[The next series of questions are for those who state that children are their dependents]:

- Ensuring your children are bathed?
- Taking your children to school or taking them to important appointments?
- Difficulty in responding to your children, or supervising your children to ensure they are safe and well?

3. Licences

Many people study or practice to achieve certain levels of knowledge or skills or privileges in areas that require licensing. These privileges or licences may relate to work, daily life or special interests. Usually, these privileges or licences are very important to those of us who have them. In order to confirm your safety and the safety of others it is important for me to be aware of what licences you have. Do you have any of the following licences:

- Motor vehicle?
- Truck driving licence?
- Motorcycle licence?
- Bus licence?
- License to operate a train?
- Gun/firearm license?
- Pilot licence?
- Captain's license (boat, ship)?
- Professional license (medical, law or other)?
- Machine operator license?

Do you have any concerns at this time that how you are feeling or the things you are dealing with currently may distract you while performing any of the activities related to your licences?

4. Relationships

Relationships with others are a major component of our lives. Some people can make us feel supported, safe or good. Others can make us feel threatened, angry or otherwise bad. The way we experience or relate to others can also differ across time and situations. The next few questions I am going to ask you are about common difficulties that many people have with others in their lives or even strangers:

- Some people feel or believe they are being rejected by others in their lives. Have you had this experience, and if so, with whom?
- Some people report losing interest in spending time with others or find it difficult to tolerate being around others. Have you had this experience, and if so, with whom?
- Some people believe that others want to hurt them or are trying to hurt them or are currently doing things to hurt them. Have you had this experience, and if so, with whom?
- Some people notice that they are becoming more irritable or angry with others. Have you had this experience, and if so, with whom?
- Some people notice that others around them appear to be scared of them. Have you had this experience, and if so, with whom?
- Some people describe being physically aggressive with others. Have you had this experience, and if so, with whom?

5. Work or School

Often when people are not feeling well they find it difficult to fulfill work or school requirements to their usual level. Many people begin to think they are becoming lazy or are unqualified because of the difficulty they are having, but that is not true; it is because they are not well. The next few questions I am going to ask you are about common difficulties that many people have reported in meeting work or school requirements – do any of the following apply to you?

- Missing days at work or school?
- Arriving late to work or school?
- Anxiety about going in to work or school?
- Beginning to miss deadlines?
- Noticed deterioration in performance and making more mistakes, or marks are dropping?
- Worried that job performance may be reduced to an extent that it may place others at risk?

References

1. Silveira J, Rockman P. Mental disorders, risks, and disability: Primary care needs a novel approach. *Canadian Family Physician*. 2016;62(12):958-960.
2. Silveira J, Rockman P, Fulford C, Hunter J. Approach to risk identification in undifferentiated mental disorders. *Canadian Family Physician*. 2016;62(12):972-978.

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Developed by:



In collaboration with:



Ontario College of Family Physicians

