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LETHAL MEANS  
SAFETY  
FOR COMMUNITY  
MEMBERS



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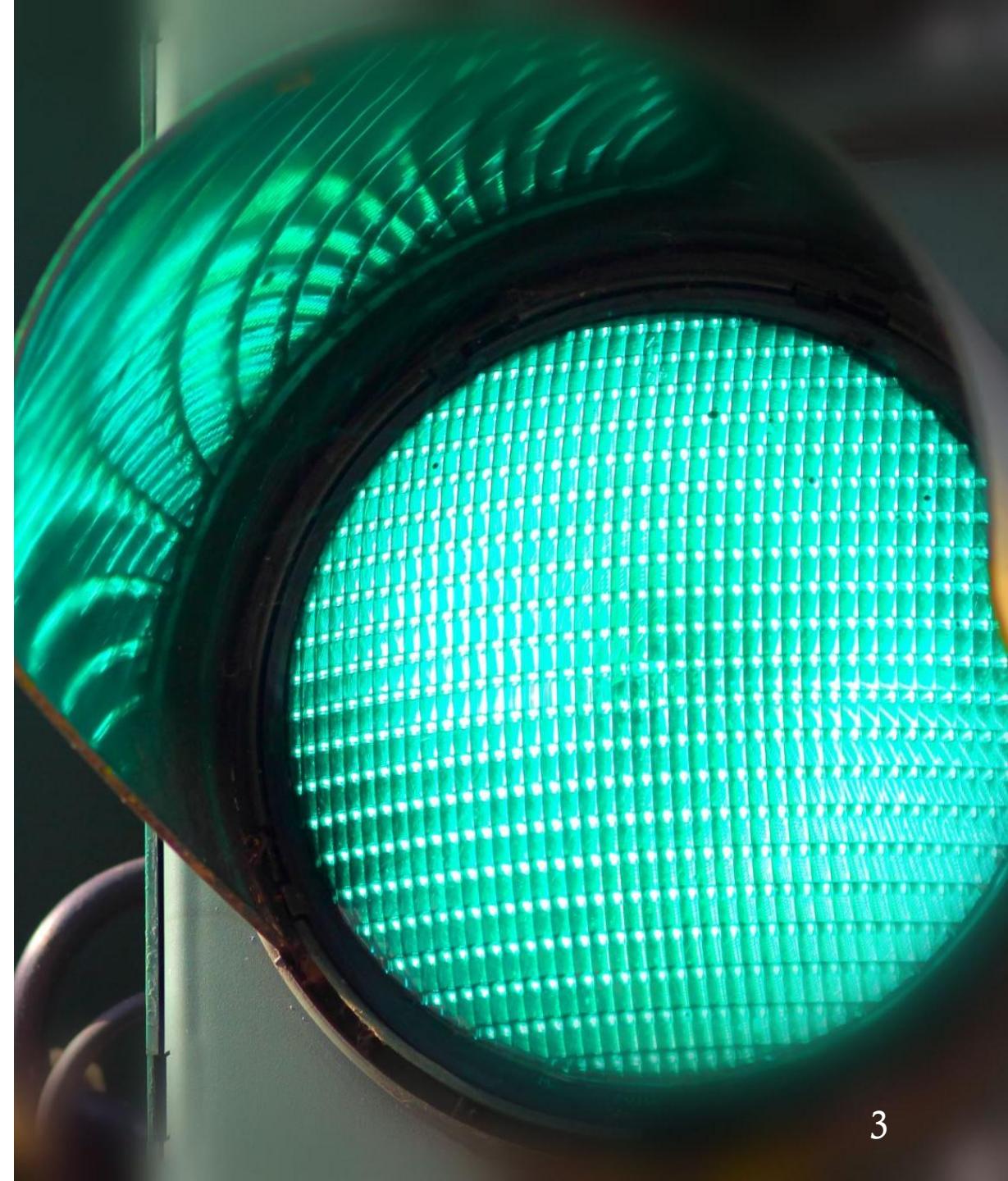
# DISCLOSURES

- No conflicts of interest
- No financial interests or sponsorships
- No board memberships
- Views in this presentation are those of the presenter and based in relevant research and clinical practice
- Not speaking for the Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration, VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System, or the United States federal government

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# CONTENT ADVISEMENT

- Suicide and overdose are difficult topics
- You will see pictures and videos of unloaded firearms; no gunshots
- Feel free to step away at any time
- If you need additional support, the following resources are available:
  - 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline – Call/text 988
  - Detroit Wayne Integrated Health Network Crisis Line: 800-241-4949
  - 911 or closest emergency room
  - Speak with me after



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# PRESENTATION OUTLINE

- Review of suicide data
- Defining lethal means
- Overview of Lethal Means Safety Counseling
- How to have conversations about lethal means
- Discussion of lethal means safety measures
- Resources
- Questions

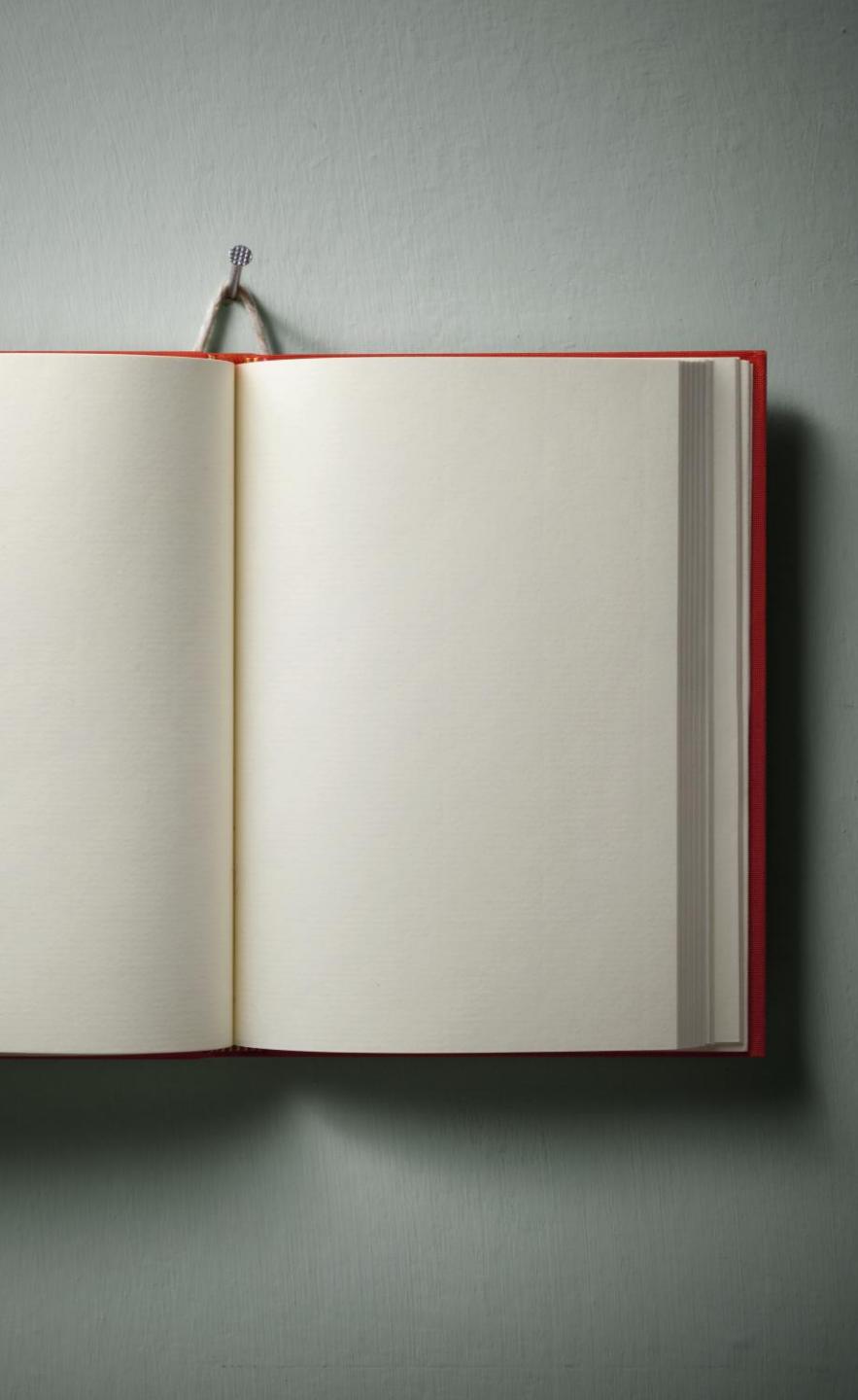


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# SUICIDE DATA

- Suicide is a national public health concern
- Suicide rates have risen over time
- In 2023, there were 49,316 suicide deaths (CDC Wonder, 2025)
- Suicide deaths are more than 2x greater than homicide (22,830 in 2023)
- There were 1,529 suicide deaths in Michigan in 2023
- Each suicide death impacts approximately 135 lives (Cerel et al., 2019)





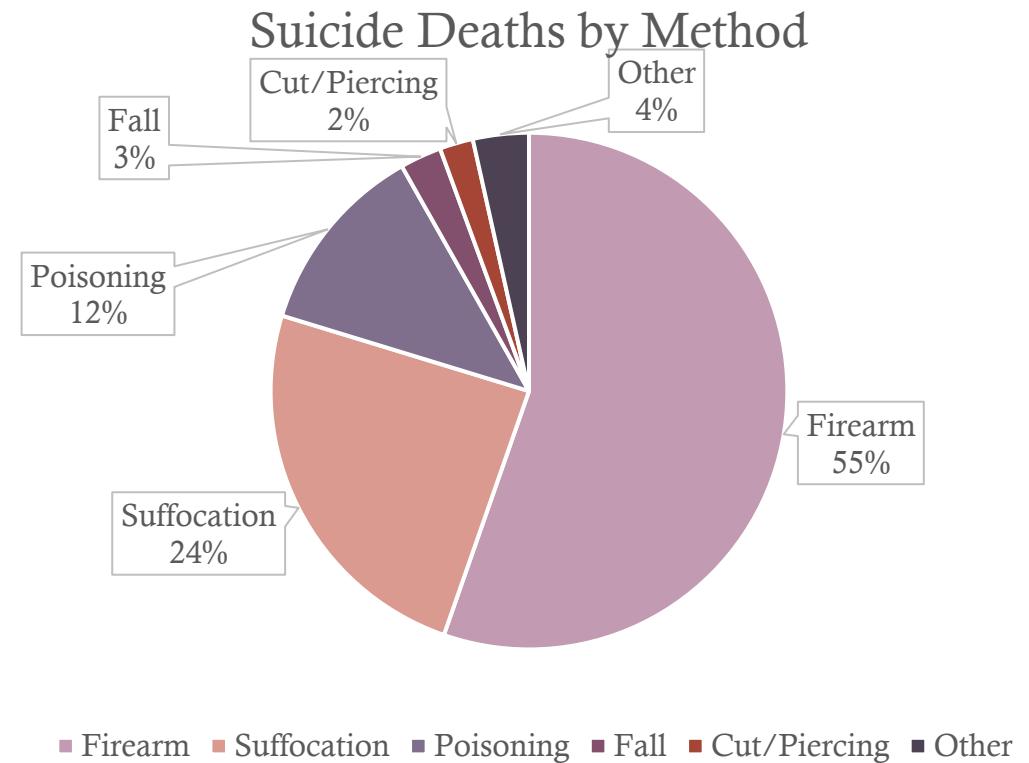
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# DEFINING LETHAL MEANS

- Items or actions that may be utilized as a method to end the life of self or others, whether intentionally or unintentionally
- Termed “lethal” due to risk of resulting in death
- Examples include:
  - Firearms
  - Medications
  - Hanging devices
  - Alcohol or other drugs
  - Sharp objects

# SUICIDE DEATHS BY METHOD

- Firearms account for the largest portion of suicide deaths
- Poisoning can include medication overdose, chemical ingestion, or gas inhalation
- Other attempts include drowning, fire, motor vehicle, or non-specified injury
- Firearm attempts are lethal 90% of time, while all other method attempts combined are lethal 5% of the time
- Data available through CDC WISQARS



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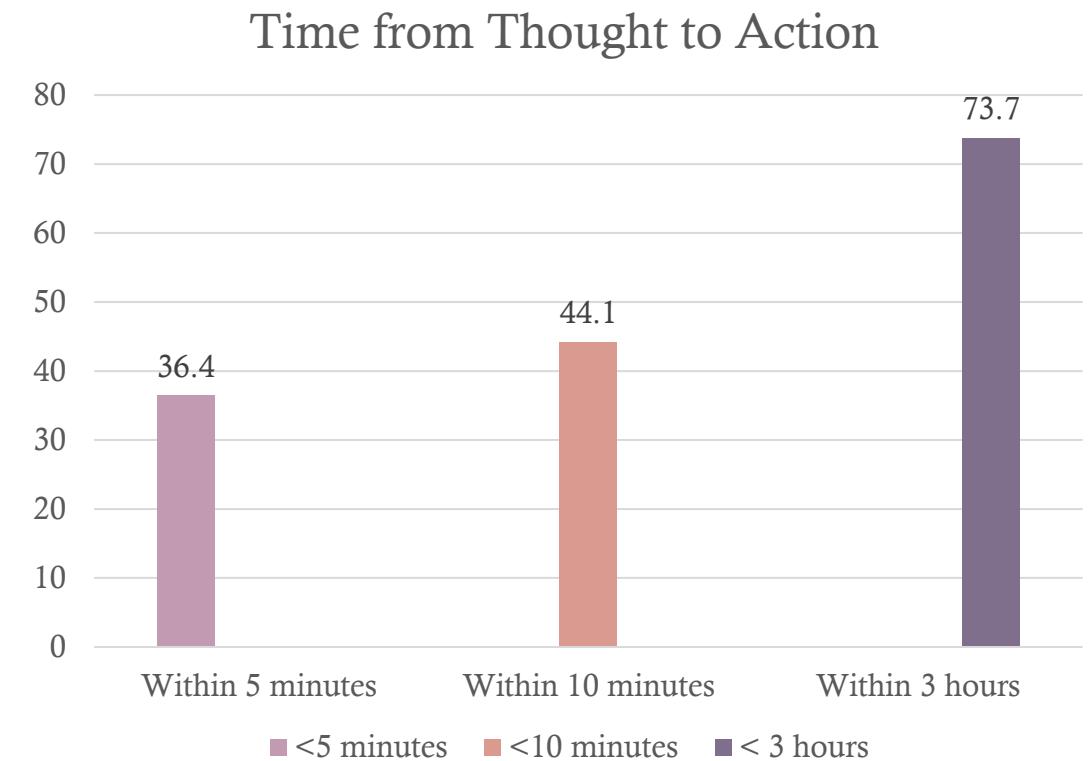
# LETHAL MEANS SAFETY COUNSELING

- Voluntary, collaborative, and person-centered conversation focused on modifying access to lethal means  
(Aunon et al, 2025; Pruitt et al., 2022; Pallin and Barnhorst, 2021)
- Flexible
- Focus on improving safety measures
- Seeking progress not perfection



# BUILDING TIME AND DISTANCE

- Suicide crises can be brief, lasting between a few minutes to a few hours (Paashaus et al., 2021)
- Some may plan for suicide in advance and have means identified or available
- Immediate or quickly available access to means during times of crisis increases risk
- The goal is to build TIME and DISTANCE between a person and their identified method
- Individuals rarely switch to other suicide methods when chosen method is unavailable (Daigle, 2005; Yip, 2012)





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## LETHAL MEANS SAFETY WORKS

- Strong evidence that modifying access to means saves lives (Hawton et al., 2024)
- Examples:
  - UK coal gas to natural gas transition (Kreitman, 1976)
  - Australia National Firearms Agreement (Ramchand and Saunders, 2021)
  - Risk-based firearm seizure laws in Indiana and Connecticut (Kivistö and Phalen, 2015)
  - Golden Gate Bridge barrier (Shin et al., 2025)
  - Sri Lanka pesticide regulations (Noghrehchi et al., 2024)

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# WHO IS LETHAL MEANS SAFETY FOR?

- Anyone
- People in crisis
- Individuals with suicidal ideation
- Those at risk of overdose
- Family and friends
- Parents or guardians





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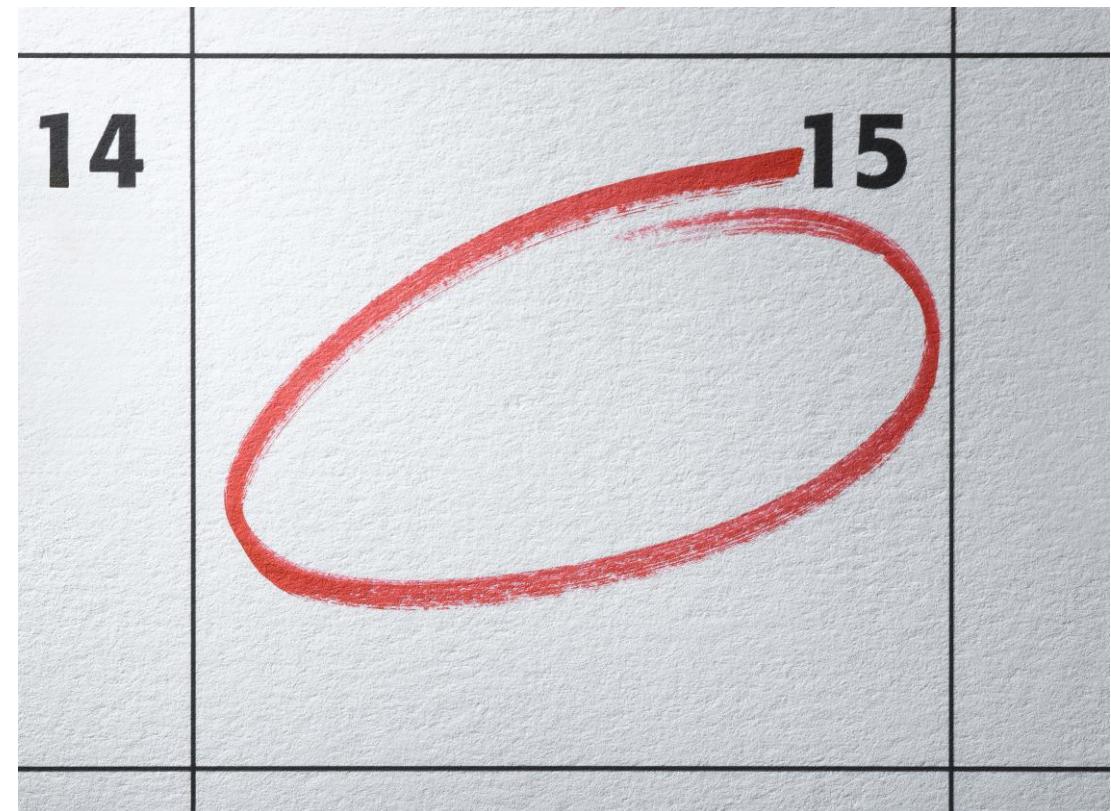
# WHAT IS IT EXACTLY?

- Conversation
- Voluntary
- Collaborative
- Person-centered
- Emphasis on enhancing safety by modifying access to lethal means
- Focused on making progress, not seeking perfection
- Goals can be temporary, or long-term

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# WHEN CAN IT HAPPEN?

- Anytime
- During times of crisis, but not when a suicide attempt is happening
- Signs of increasing risk, such as major life stressors or relationship changes
- Lethal means are present in the home
- At points of transition, such as discharge from the hospital, moving, or aging
- During times of stability where no risk is present





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## WHERE CAN IT HAPPEN?

- Setting that allows for privacy and safety of everyone involved
- Formal or informal interaction
- Home, hospital, provider office, etc.
- Quiet
- Location where it will not be rushed
- Free of distraction
- Away from the lethal means

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# WHY DO WE DO IT?

- To get someone through a crisis
- Help a person get to a better place
- Improve long-term safety
- Reduce immediate risk
- Make room for additional support and skills
- Lessen the risk to others
- Prepare for future stressors or crises





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## HOW DO WE DO IT?

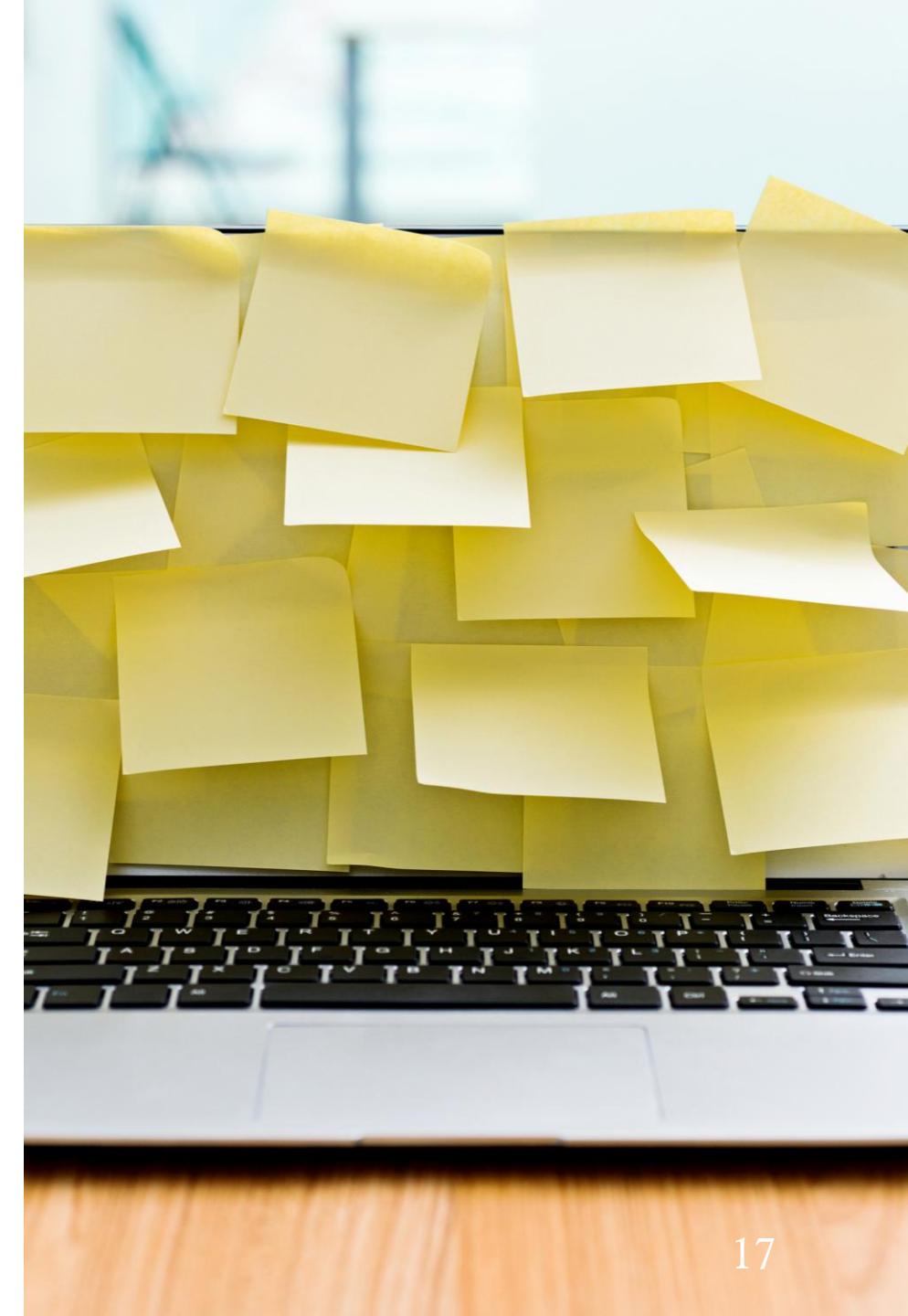
- Open the door to discussion
- Invite someone to talk about means
- Ask open-ended questions
- Approach with compassion and curiosity
- Allow for time and space
- Respect personal values and beliefs
- Respond to needs

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# IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

- Be aware of your own comfort level in having these conversations.
- Be aware of your own biases and expertise (e.g. views on firearms or drugs, or beliefs about suicide).
- Look for assistance if you do not have the skills or comfort in having this conversation.
- Do not negotiate with or try to plan for safety with someone who has already taken action or has the lethal means in hand with intention to act immediately. Call 911.



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# SUICIDE RISK FACTORS

- Lack of social support or connection
- Current or past mental health diagnoses
- History of prior suicide attempts
- Legal, financial, or employment problems
- Relationship loss or grief
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Presence of risk factors does not guarantee that a person will act





# SUICIDE WARNING SIGNS

- Talking about wanting to die or kill themselves
- Feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, powerlessness, or emptiness
- Feeling trapped or unbearable emotional pain
- Feeling like a burden to others or that people would be better off without them
- Giving away belongings
- Researching suicide methods, preparing a note, gathering means
- Actively planning suicide (e.g. date, location)

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# OVERDOSE RISK FACTORS

- Prescribed or using opioids or sedatives
- Access to quantities of medication
- Currently using illicit substances
- Using substances alone or with others who are also using
- Use of multiple substances or medications at the same time
- History of prior overdose or overdose intervention





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# THE INVITATION

- Notice that someone may be at risk
- Address the current stressors or crisis
- Express concern
- Ask directly, “Are you thinking about suicide?”
- Discuss if they are willing to talk about ways to improve safety
- Make space and time for the conversation
- Prioritize and focus

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# ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

- Avoid yes or no questions
- Explore feelings in addition to facts
- Ask for clarification
- Paraphrase what you hear
- Be curious
- “Tell me more” or “I’d like to hear about...”
- Get details
- Don’t rush
- Avoid judgment





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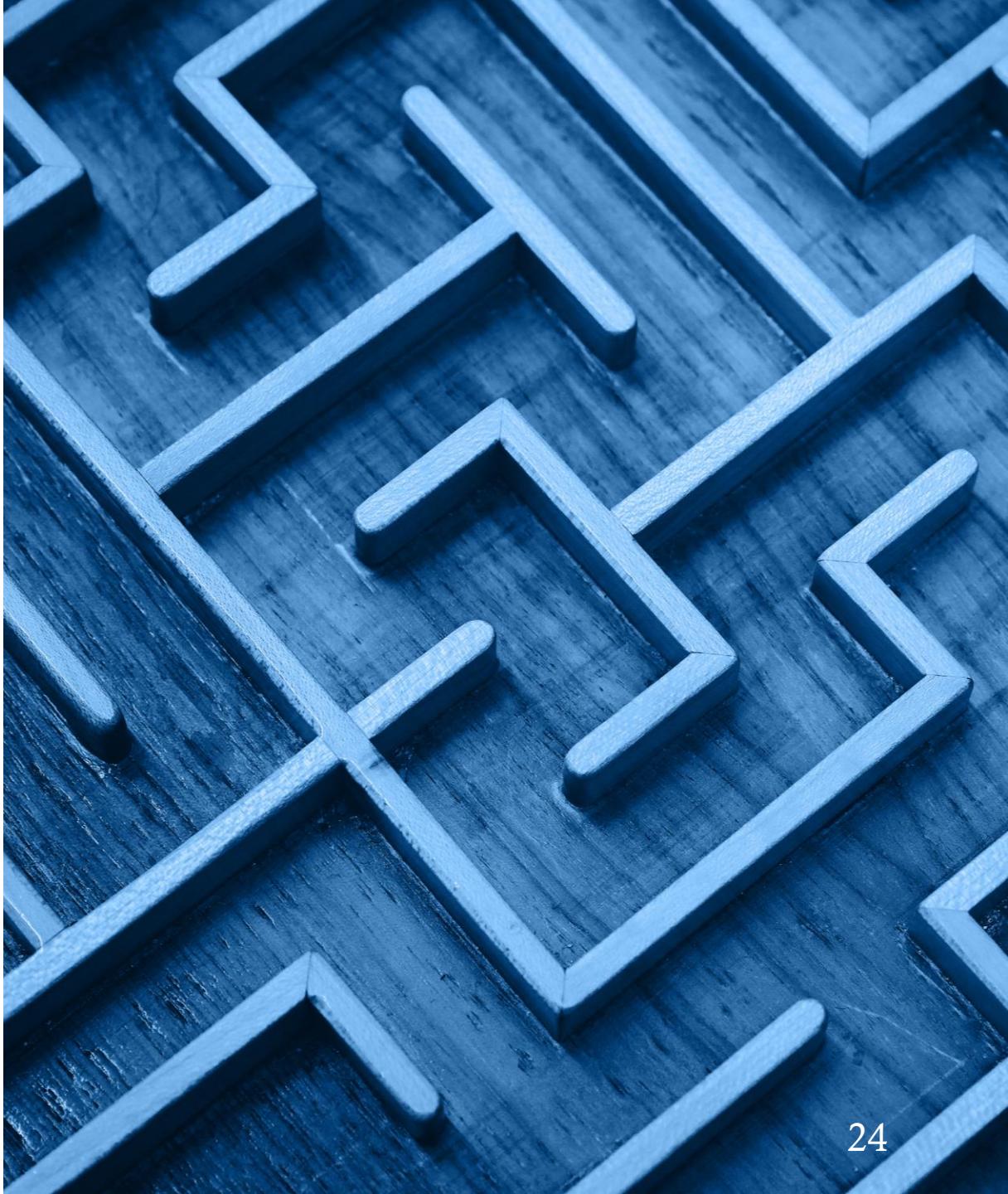
## ASK ABOUT LETHAL MEANS

- If the person has identified a plan, ask about that first
- Access to firearms, medications, hanging devices, etc.
- Current secure storage or safety practices
- Sometimes people have multiple methods, including multiple firearms or locations for medication
- Exposure to lethal means at other settings

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# EXPLORE MODIFYING ACCESS

- What safety measures are already in place
- Who has access
- Openness to trying new things
- Consider temporary vs. long-term measures
- Out-of-home vs. in-home access
- Values, beliefs, and needs around access to means





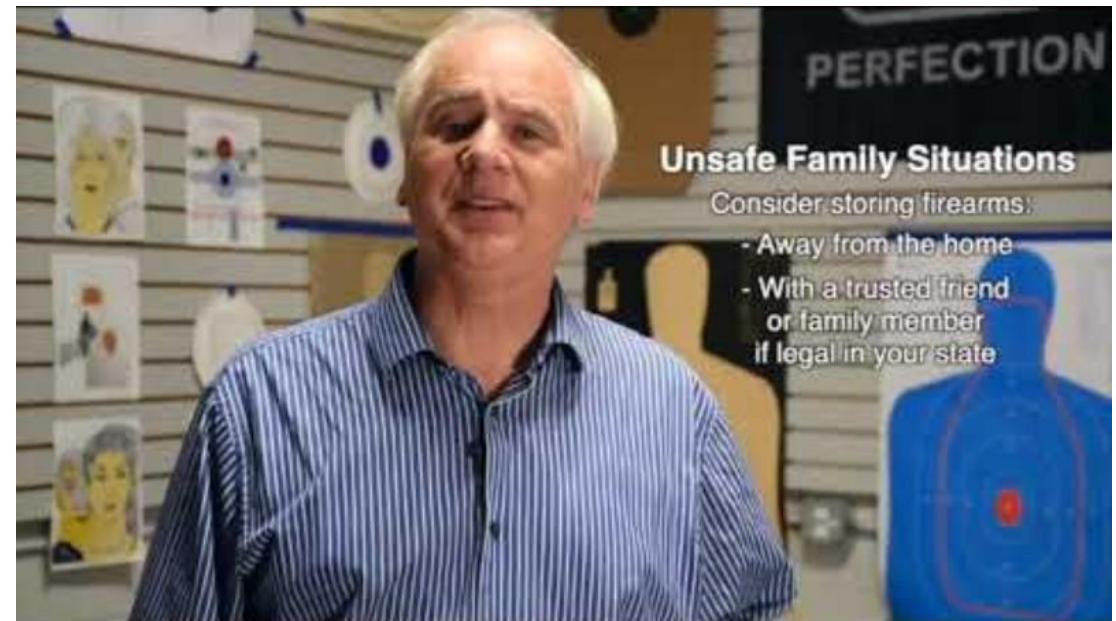
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## LETHAL MEANS SAFETY MEASURES

- Consider values and needs (e.g. medication for health, firearms for safety, knives for cooking)
- Some options are more affordable or accessible than others
- Focus on building time and distance between a person and the means
- Many safety practices are applicable across multiple means

# INTRODUCTION TO SECURE STORAGE

- Note: You will see unloaded firearms of multiple types. There will be no gunshots.
- Practices shown in the video for firearms are also appropriate for other lethal means
- Difference between need for immediate access and infrequent access
- Lethal Means Safety Counseling balances needs, values, and safety whenever possible



[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y\\_OYPYdkTY8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_OYPYdkTY8)



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## OUT OF HOME STORAGE

- Provides the most time and distance
- Can include family/friends, depending on comfort and legal ability to have firearms
- Storage facilities, gun ranges, firearms dealers
- Law enforcement
- Not all out of home storage options are available in all locations

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# IN-HOME STORAGE

- Still offers protection and modifies risk
- Variety of secure storage and safety devices
- Can involve others to help, such as changing combinations or holding on to keys
- Allows a level of control
- May have need for immediate access to medications, firearms, or other means





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# MEDICATION SAFETY

- Understand the purpose of the medication
- Explore safe alternatives or treatments, such as less lethal medications
- Dispose of old or unwanted medication (takeback days, disposal boxes, deactivation products)
- Limit amount of medicine on hand
- Blister packing
- Explore all places medications are stored
- Include over-the-counter and prescription medicines
- Pursue naloxone training and access

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# FIREARM SAFETY

- Do not handle a firearm if you are not fully comfortable
- Assume all firearms are loaded
- Verify safety of location and keep firearm pointed away from self or others at all times



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# FIREARM CONVERSATION TIPS

- Be aware of your own comfort level, beliefs, and experience
- Involve others with more knowledge if needed
- Understand reason for owning firearms
- Ask about history of firearm use and training
- Explore total number and locations of firearms and availability of access
- Determine presence of ammunition
- Discuss current secure storage practices



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# FIREARM SECURE STORAGE

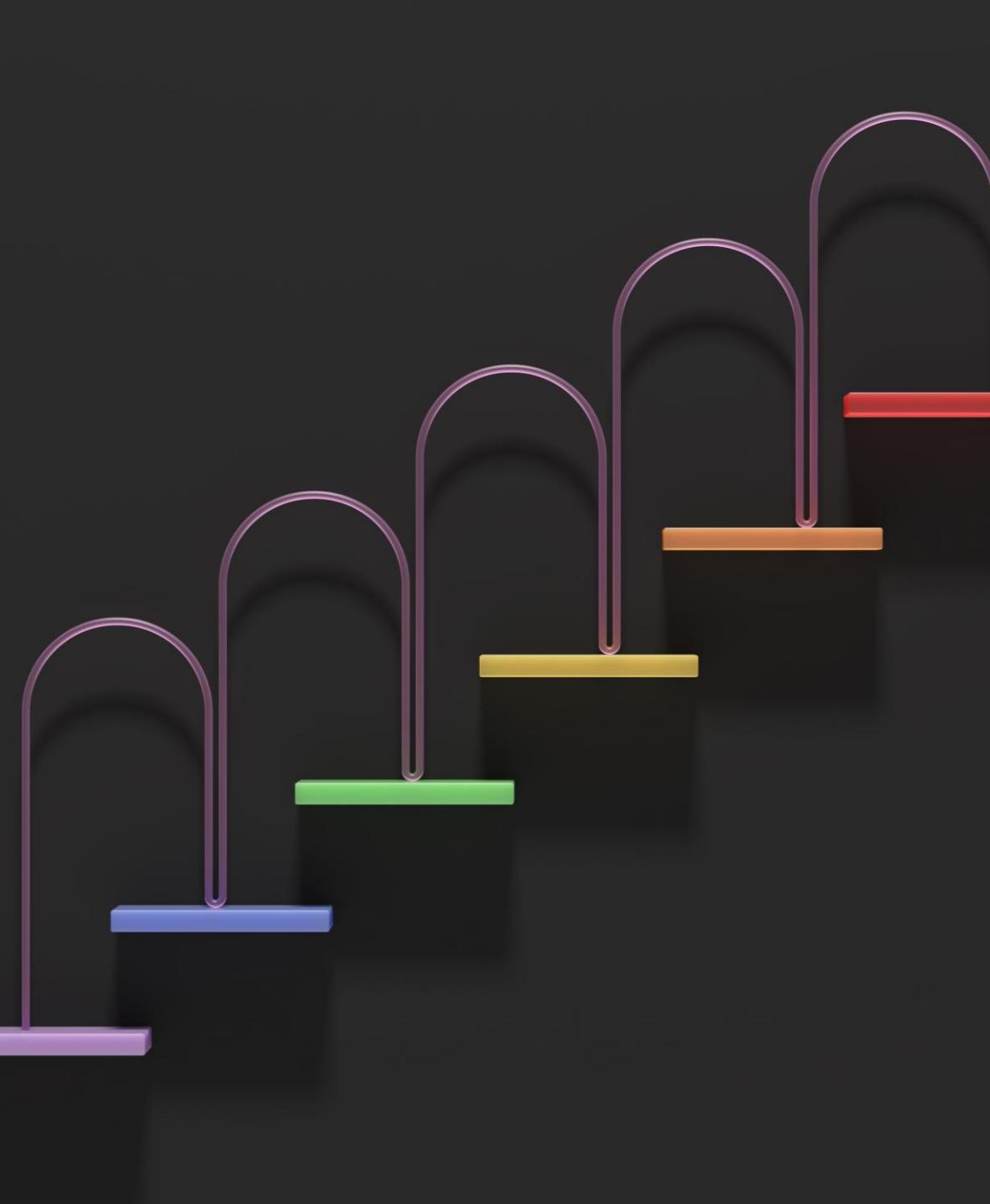
- Gunlocks (cable or trigger)
- Gun safes
- Lifejacket holsters
- Giving keys to locks or safes to someone else, or having them change combinations
- Storing the firearm or ammunition outside the home
- Remove components of the firearm



# LETHAL MEANS SAFETY OPTIONS



Images sourced from Google images search



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## LETHAL MEANS SAFETY PLAN

- Determine immediate need versus occasional need
- Discuss out-of-home and in-home storage options
- Identify and obtain appropriate secure storage devices
- Divide lethal means components and store separately
- Designate who will store means and when
- Seek progress not perfection



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## IMPLEMENTING LETHAL MEANS SAFETY

- Identify lethal means and secure storage or safety measures
- Plan for when, who, and how plan will be implemented (involving others is key)
- Identify potential barriers
- Develop a safety plan for crisis including coping skills, supports, and emergency assistance
- Collaborate, do not dictate
- Follow up to make sure steps were completed

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# AFTER A CRISIS

- Most crises are brief
- Review and reassess the plan
- Adjust the plan as needed
- Determine if measures will be short-term or long-term
- Continue to monitor and respond to support needs
- Plan for future





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## GENERAL CONVERSATION TIPS

- Remain calm
- Listen more than you speak
- Maintain eye contact
- Do not argue
- Use open body language
- Use supportive, encouraging comments
- Be honest about limits



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# RESOURCES

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988  
SUICIDE  
& CRISIS  
LIFELINE

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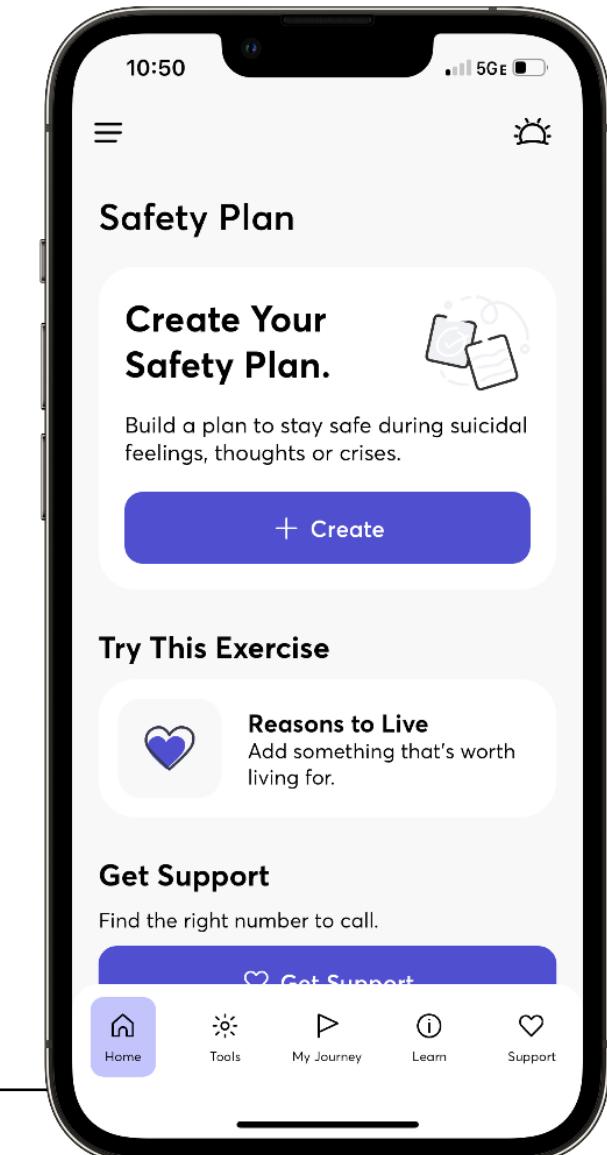
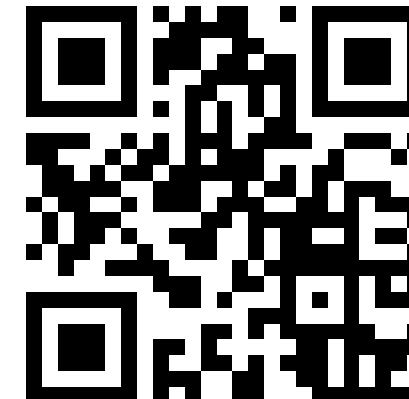
## 988 SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE

- Call or text 988
- Chat online at <https://chat.988lifeline.org/>
- Available 24/7
- Free & confidential
- Support & crisis intervention for anyone including individuals, family members, or concerned others

# SAFETY PLAN APP

## Features:

- Personalized, step-by-step action plan to recognize and cope with suicidal thoughts
- Reasons to live
- Coping tools
- Self-assessment measures
- Crisis Resources



<https://mobile.va.gov/appstore>

# VA MOBILE APPS



- Available on all smart devices through Google Play or Apple App Store
- Free
- For Veterans and general public
- Variety of applications for issues such as insomnia, mindfulness, PTSD, relationships, anger management, and accessing VA care and benefits
- More information available at <https://mobile.va.gov/appstore>

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# PROJECT CHILDSAFE

- Information for gun owners, parents, educators, children, law enforcement
- Educational materials including age-appropriate videos
- Secure storage information and resources
- <https://projectchildsafe.org/>



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# THE BULLETPONTS PROJECT



The BulletPoints Project

—  
Clinical tools for preventing  
firearm injury

- Resource for clinicians, medical providers, and educators
- Tools for providing lethal means safety interventions
- Clinical scenarios, resources, and media
- Podcast and webinar library
- <https://www.bulletpointsproject.org/>

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# ROCKY MOUNTAIN MIRECC

- Overview of lethal means safety and lethal means safety counseling
- Data and research
- Clinical tools for lethal means safety
- Tips for lethal means safety conversations
- Download and print resources, brochures, and toolkits
- <https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/lethalmeanssafety/>



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# QUESTIONS



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# THANK YOU

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