
LETHAL MEANS SAFETY FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS



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

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



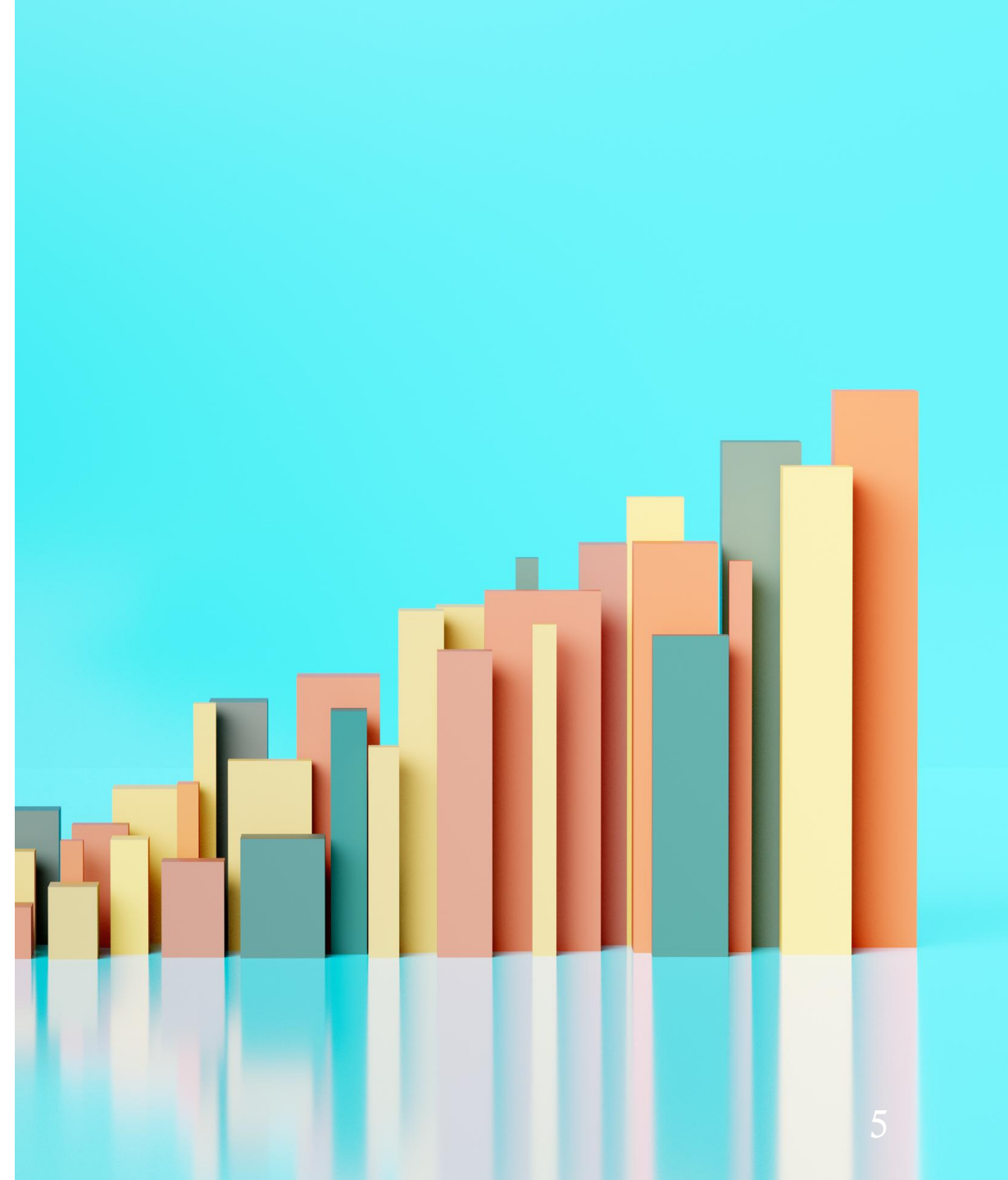


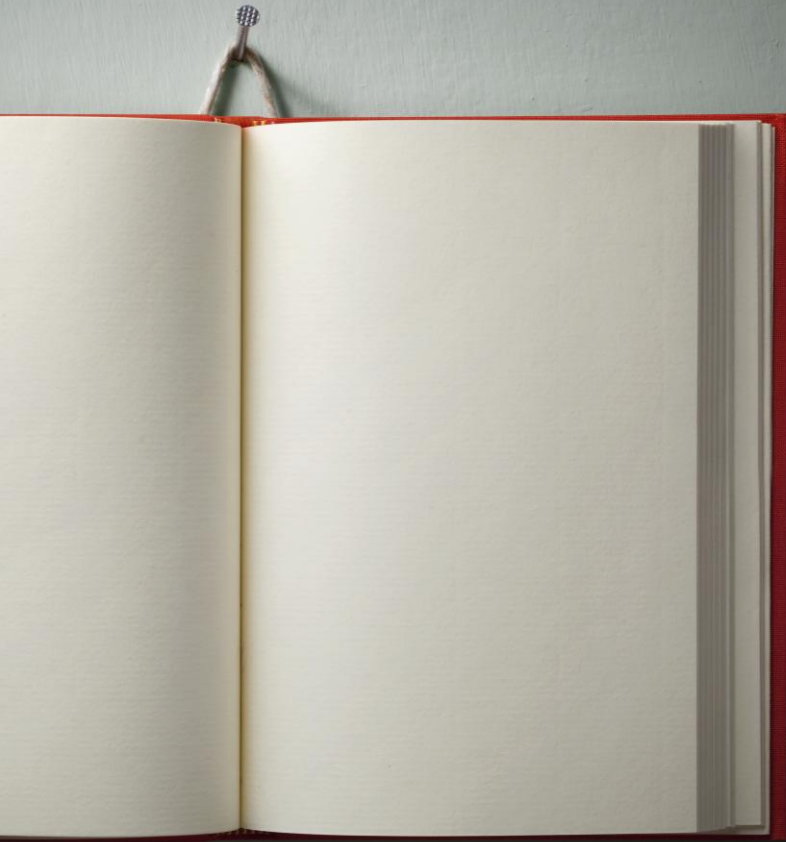
PRESENTATION OUTLINE

- 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

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 (Cere1 et al., 2019)



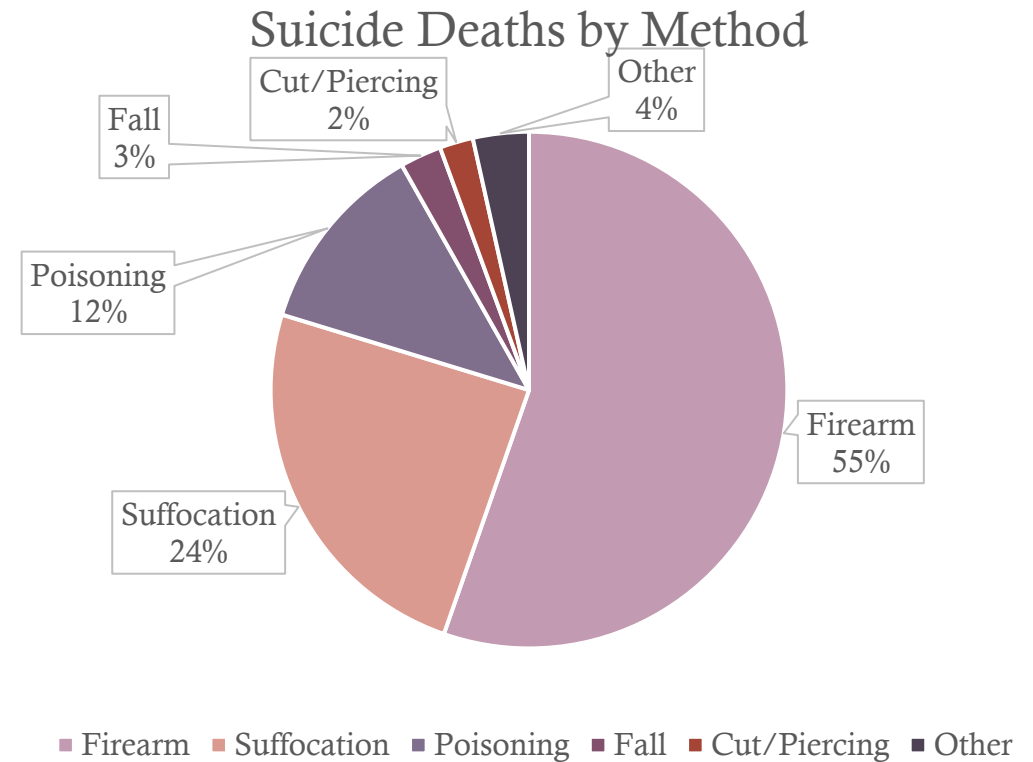


DEFINING LETHAL MEANS

- 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



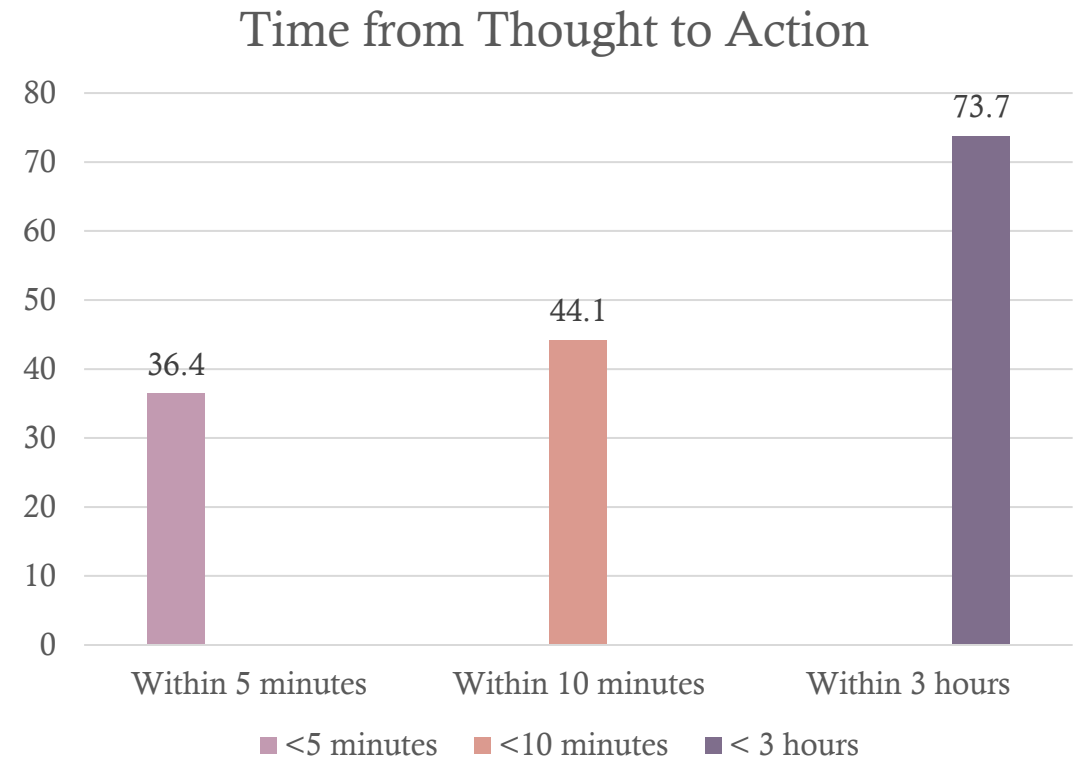


LETHAL MEANS SAFETY COUNSELING

- 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)





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 (Kivisto and Phalen, 2015)
 - Golden Gate Bridge barrier (Shin et al., 2025)
 - Sri Lanka pesticide regulations (Noghrehchi et al., 2024)

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



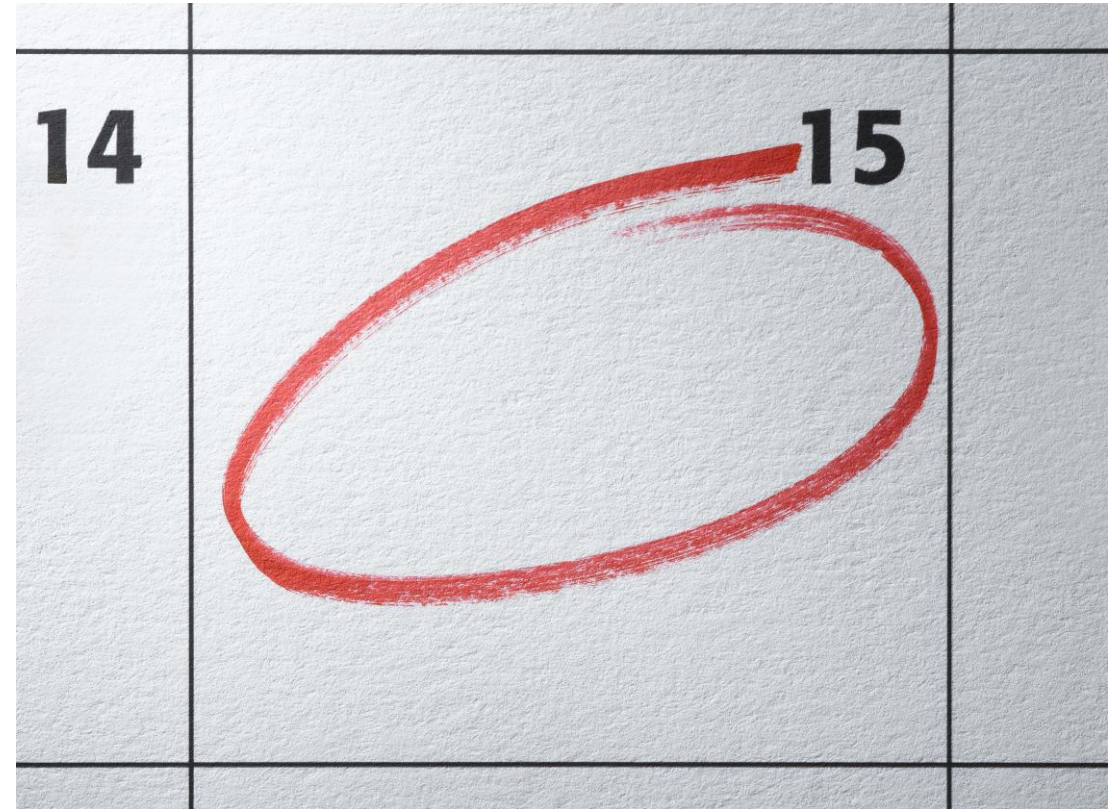


WHAT IS IT EXACTLY?

- 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

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





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

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





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

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.



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)

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





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

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



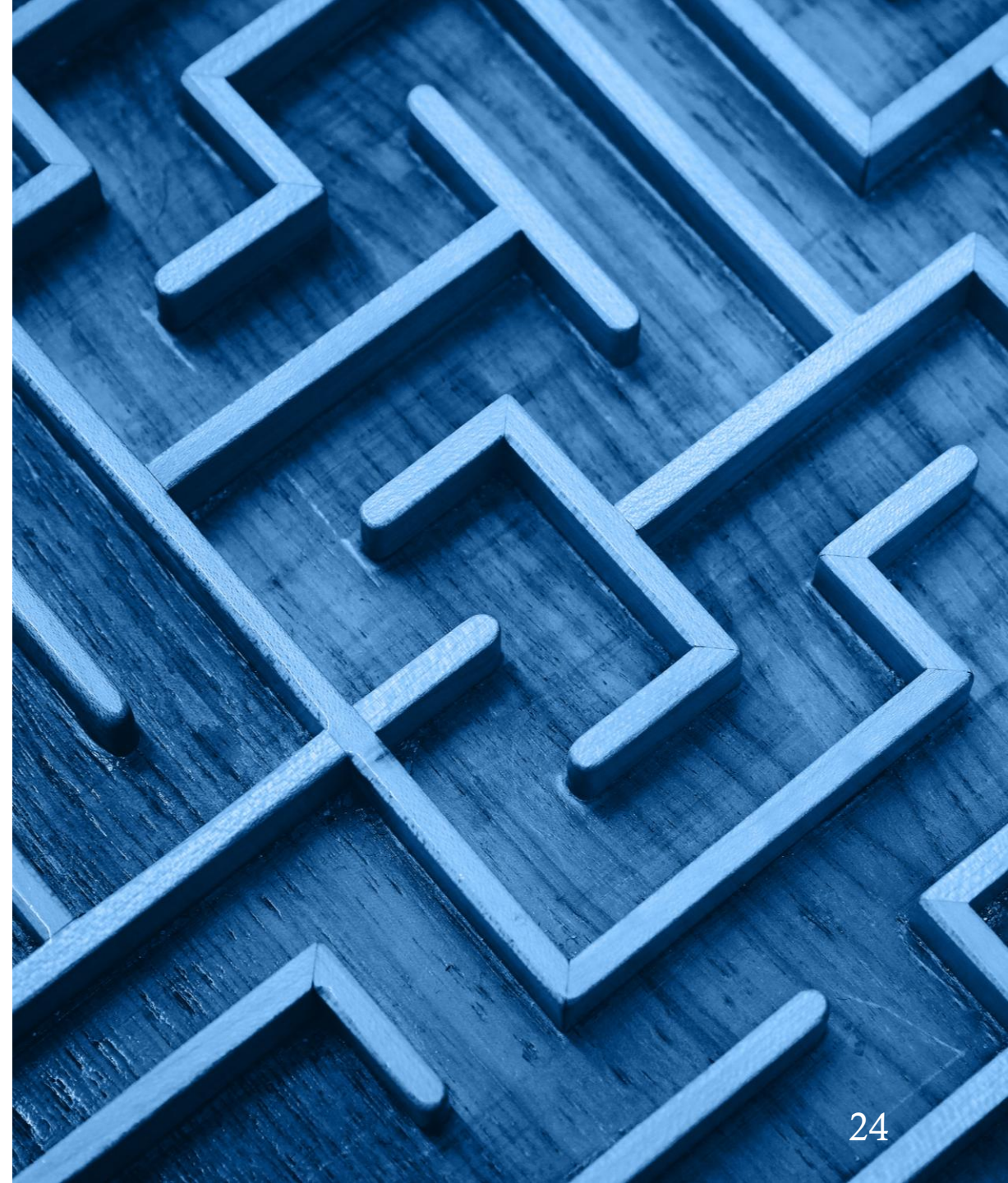


ASK ABOUT LETHAL MEANS

- 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

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





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



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

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





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

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



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



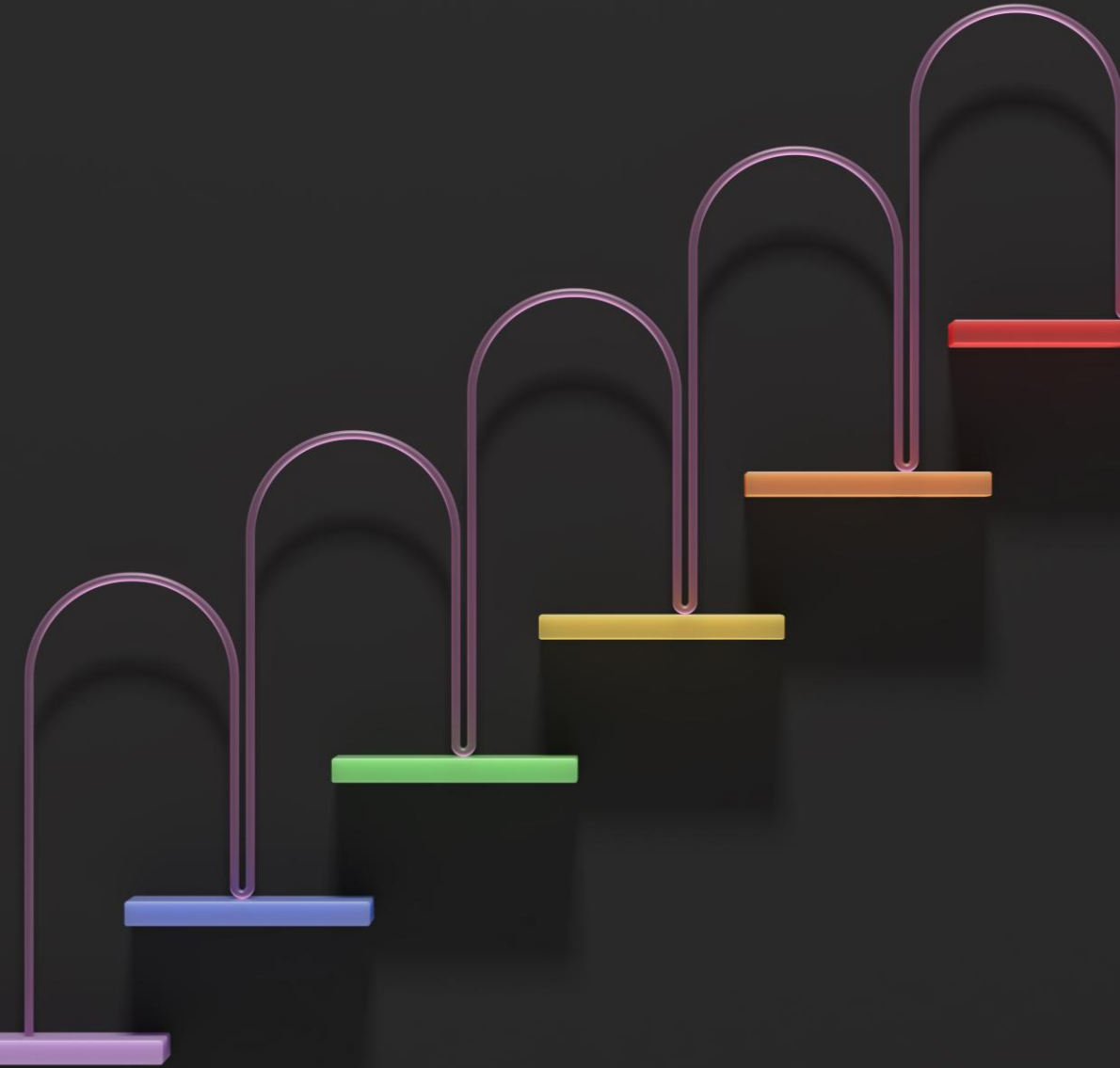
FIREARM SECURE STORAGE

- 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





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



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

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





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



RESOURCES

The logo for the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. It features the number '988' in a large, bold, white sans-serif font. Below the number, the words 'SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE' are written in a smaller, white, all-caps sans-serif font, stacked in three lines: 'SUICIDE', '& CRISIS', and 'LIFELINE'. The entire text is set against a dark blue background that is framed by a white border.

988

SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE

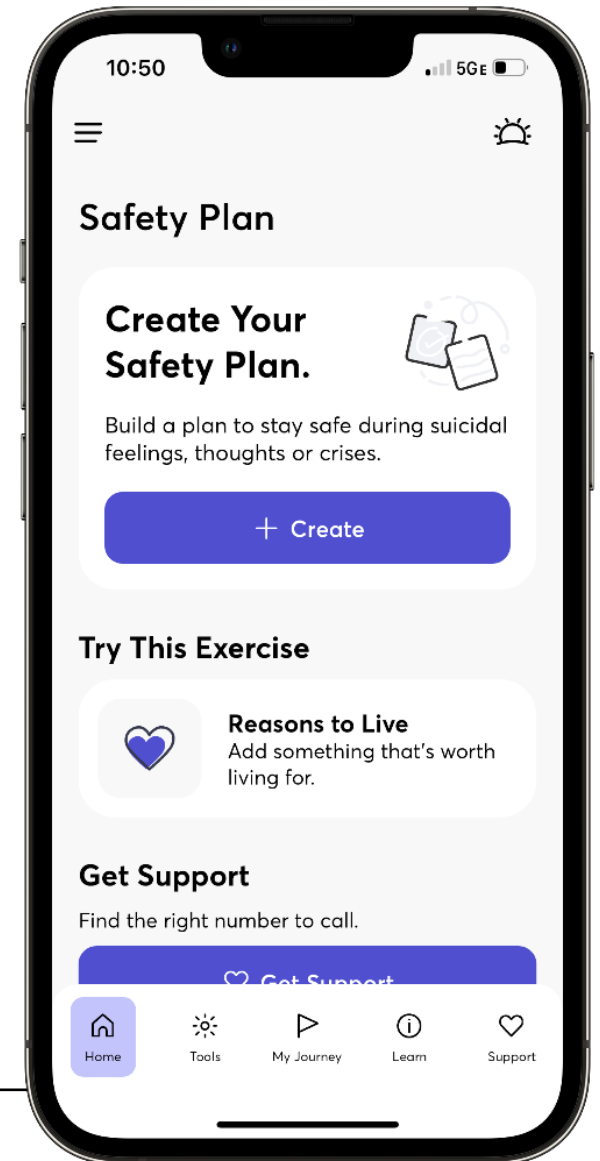
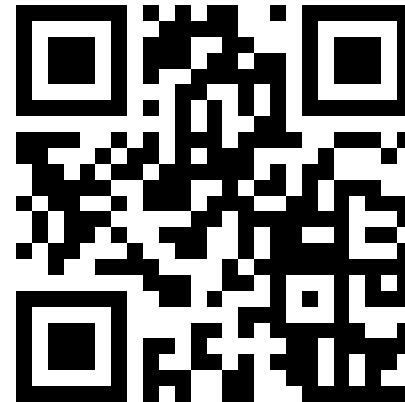
988 SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE

- 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>

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/>



THE BULLETPOINTS 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/>

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/>



QUESTIONS



THANK YOU

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