

Forming a no-suicide contract with a patient

Introduction

No-suicide contracts are used with patients who are believed to be suicidal. In a no-suicide contract, the patient is asked to agree to control his suicidal impulses and to contact a nurse or other mental health professional before attempting suicide. The use of no-suicide contracts is believed to help decrease the risk and incidence of suicide.

Despite its potential benefits, a no-suicide contract should be used with caution. The patient may agree to a contract with no intention of adhering to his side of it, giving mental health professionals a false sense of security. This contract doesn't replace a thorough assessment of suicide risk.

Equipment

- No-suicide contract form

Implementation

1. Confirm the patient's identity using two patient identifiers according to your facility's policy.⁴
2. Perform a suicide risk assessment *to determine the patient's risk and whether his risk is low or high.*
3. Establish suicide precautions for the patient as needed.
4. Gather your facility's no-suicide contract form.
5. Explain the no-suicide contract to the patient in a nonthreatening and nonaccusatory manner.
6. Ask the patient to agree to one of these statements:
 - ✓ "No matter what happens, I will not kill myself, accidentally or on purpose, at any time." *The term "no matter what" is used so the suicidal person can't shift responsibility for his safety onto someone else.*
 - ✓ "I will not kill myself while in the hospital." *Giving a time frame in incremental amounts ensures safety for a specific period, such as until the next therapy session or crisis intervention meeting.*
 - ✓ "I agree to make contact with a stated person or agency if I consider harming or decide to harm myself."
7. If the patient agrees, have the patient sign the contract and then sign it yourself.
8. Document the procedure.⁵

Special Considerations

- Informed consent isn't needed for this procedure. *Preventing suicide is usually considered an ethically justified reason to override the need for informed consent.*

Patient Teaching

Teach the patient the purpose of the "no-suicide contract." Teach the patient how to notify his stated contact person if he starts feeling as if he wants to harm himself. Make sure the patient has the contact numbers with him at all times *because feelings of self-harm may come on quickly.*

Documentation

Document that the patient has agreed to a no-suicide contract. Document the patient's contact person and any patient teaching performed. Also, include a copy of the no-suicide contract in the patient's chart.

References

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