

Suicide Risk and Psychotic Experiences: Qualitative Themes to Inform Safety Planning for High Risk Adolescents

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Abstract

Background & Aim:

Youth with psychosis–spectrum conditions have a markedly elevated risk for suicidal thoughts and behavior (STB). Little research has examined the intersection of STB and psychosis–spectrum experiences among teens in acute psychiatric settings, where STB are prevalent, proximal, and severe, or qualitatively explored safety planning needs of youth with emerging psychosis.

Methods:

This study qualitatively explored the co–occurrence of STB and psychosis among psychiatrically hospitalized teens by conducting interviews with 18 teen–caregiver dyads. We then solicited feedback on the process and content of a safety planning protocol and developed preliminary guidelines tailored to these teens.

Results:

For some youth, STB are a function of psychosis, and subsequent life–threatening behaviors may lack intent to die. Some unsafe behaviors stem from command hallucinations, grandiosity, impaired reality testing, or other psychotic processes. Safety planning feedback indicates that helpful considerations include explicit discussion of how psychosis symptoms influence safety, reducing exposure to triggers, identifying early warning signs from teen and caregiver perspectives, discussing skills for managing psychotic experiences, and creating caregiver–facing plans to guide recognition and response. Qualitative themes will be presented, along with preliminary guidelines for safety planning.

Conclusion:

Understanding psychosis–spectrum experiences as contributing factors to suicide risk necessitates unique considerations in the context of safety planning.

Clinical Implications:

Given the high risk for suicide associated with psychosis, practitioners working with teens may benefit from implementing procedures to screen for psychosis and assess how these experiences may influence STBs. A careful process of safety planning may be a critical suicide prevention measure for the unique population of teens experiencing psychosis–spectrum symptoms.