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The Determination of Suicide

The single-most clear criterion of suicidal danger probably comes by evaluating the person's determination toward suicide as it is manifested in his suicidal plan. People usually do not kill themselves impulsively or meaninglessly or without considerable forethought and planning. The determination to suicide usually takes a specific form; the details of which have been carefully worked out. A careful analysis of the suicidal person's plan therefore presents the most accurate way of assessing his immediate suicidal danger. There are three major facets to any suicidal plan:

- 1) The specificity of the means
- 2) The lethality of the means and
- 3) The availability of the means

I. The Specificity

A highly suicidal person knows exactly what means he will kill himself. In the absence of this specific knowledge the assumption can be made that the suicide risk is probably not high. Most people who plan to kill themselves have already decided that it will either be a gun, by knife, by pills, by jumping etc... More than that if they are far along in the development of their plan, they will know which gun, which knife, which ledge they will employ to destroy themselves. So dedicated do they become to this specific means of death that if one particular means is taken from them or made unavailable they usually will not move immediately to an alternative means of suicide. It is important then, for the counselor or police officer if he is confronting a person he suspects to being suicidal to ask the direct question, "How do you plan to kill yourself?" Then listen very carefully for the answer. If the person replies generally, "Well, I don't really know, maybe I'll shoot myself or I really hadn't thought much about it, perhaps sleeping pills," the chances are that this person does not represent an immediate high suicide risk.

II. Lethality

The second criterion is the lethality of the suicidal means. If the answer to the question "How do you plan to kill yourself?" is answered by something like, "Oh, I'll probably take a half a bottle of aspirin tablets," or some other means which clearly is not lethal, the person does not represent an immediate high suicidal risk. It is also very hard to kill oneself by traffic accident or performing some action in a crowd where their likelihood of being rescued is high.

III. Availability

The third criterion of a suicidal plan is the availability of the means. Even if one is planning to kill himself by shooting himself in the head with a gun, certainly a specific and lethal means of death, and if the gun he is planning to use is not immediately available to him, this has a mitigating effect on the suicidal rating. If he/she has not purchased the gun or he/she knows about a specific gun, but it's in someone else's house or he/she doesn't know its exact location, this has quite a different meaning than if the gun is so available that it is at the moment sitting on his table already loaded. Unavailability of the means provides more time for rescue, and secondly, it indicates the person is not quite yet progressed to a total determination to suicide.

Anyone who is communicating suicidal thoughts or ideas needs help. The importance of rating the immediate suicide danger is useful in determining what kind of help and with what urgency it must be delivered.