



The Safe Care Pathway to Prevent Suicide

By Joy Salzwedel, [Oneida Behavioral Health](#)

Suicide does not discriminate. It's the 10th leading cause of death in the United States with more than 47,500 lives lost in 2019. For Natives Americans / Alaska Natives, suicide is the second leading cause of death for those ages 35-44.

Those statistics alone are reason for concern. The fact that most of us know someone who has taken their own life, or attempted suicide, drives the situation home.

At Oneida Behavioral Health (OBH), suicide prevention is a key focus which often goes together with treatment services for addiction and mental health issues. The stigma surrounding addiction or mental health can make a person feel worthless, helpless, hopeless and hesitant to reach out for help, which can lead to suicidal thoughts.

That is why we offer the Safe Care Pathway program at OBH. The program works to identify individuals who may be at risk for suicide and creates a personalized safety plan to help the individual move away from harmful thoughts.

An initial key aspect of the safety plan involves taking steps to limit access to weapons and other harmful or lethal items. This is not meant as a punishment, rather by limiting access to weapons it limits the opportunity for someone to harm themselves when they are most vulnerable.

The program's safety plan also typically includes peer support. We cannot overstate the importance of peer support. Having the proper support is crucial for anyone struggling with addiction or mental health issues or at risk for suicide. Having a peer support group provides an important avenue for individuals to discuss their situation and to understand that they are not alone in what they are dealing with. Others have been in their shoes and have come to understand that suicide is never the answer to their problems.

As part of the Safe Care Pathway program, we also have frequent contact with the individual through face-to-face, phone or virtual contacts. We look to reach out every three days to be sure the individual remains on track with his or her safety plan.

Finally, we hope individuals and the community understand that there is no shame in reaching out when you experience unbearable pain and despair. Suicide is a hidden risk of addiction and mental health. Depression, PTSD, and other trauma-related disorders can also lead to suicidal thoughts, which is amplified with the use of drugs or alcohol.

It is up to all of us to help prevent suicide. Talking about mental health and addiction issues is crucial, along with seeking out support services, reducing access to means of self-harm and following up with loved ones are important steps. Safe Care Pathway is there to help.

As always, if you think you or a loved one needs help, don't hesitate to call Oneida Behavioral Health at (920) 490-3790.