Annexure 14: Dealing with Suicide and Self-harm

Source: University of Melbourne, 2009

Assess the Risk of Suicide or Harm to Self or Others.

People with mental disorders sometimes feel so helpless about their life, that future appears hopeless to them.

Engage the person in conversation about how they are feeling and let them describe why they are feeling this way. Ask them if they are having thoughts of suicide.

If they are, find out if they have a plan for suicide. This is not a bad question to ask someone who is mentally unwell. It is important to find out if she/he is having these thoughts in order to refer her/him for help.

If you believe the person is at risk of harming herself or himself then:

• Don’t leave the person alone;
• Seek immediate help from someone who knows about mental disorders;
• Try to remove the person from access to the means of taking their own life; and
• Try to stop the person continuing to use alcohol or drugs, in case they have been using these.

Encourage the person to get appropriate professional help.

You can encourage the person to consult a doctor who knows about mental disorders, and who is able to prescribe medication if necessary. Then you can follow-up by giving ongoing support to the person and their family. If the person is very unwell, i.e. you think they are suicidal or psychotic, and she/he is refusing to get any help from a doctor, encourage the family to consult the doctor so that they can explain the situation and get professional support.

Assessing Suicide Risk

Source: Kustner, 2011

If the client answers ‘Yes’ to any of the following questions, you must take it seriously and follow it up:

• Have you thought of how to commit suicide?
• Do you have a plan?
• Have you decided when?
• Have you ever tried it before?

Don’t be scared to ask – you won’t give the client any ideas, but rather they will feel relieved that someone has asked! Just about everyone has considered suicide, however fleetingly, at one time or another. However, if the client has a plan of suicide, the risk is very high.

If you feel that the client is in any way at suicide-risk, try not to leave them on their own after the counselling session.

Encourage the client to speak to a psychologist or doctor, and walk with them to the health care professional, if possible. Ask the client if you can call a trusted friend or family member to come and fetch them, even if they have their own transport.