



Firearms and Suicide: How to Use Tools from Dialectical Behavior Therapy in Lethal Means Safety Counseling

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Today's Agenda

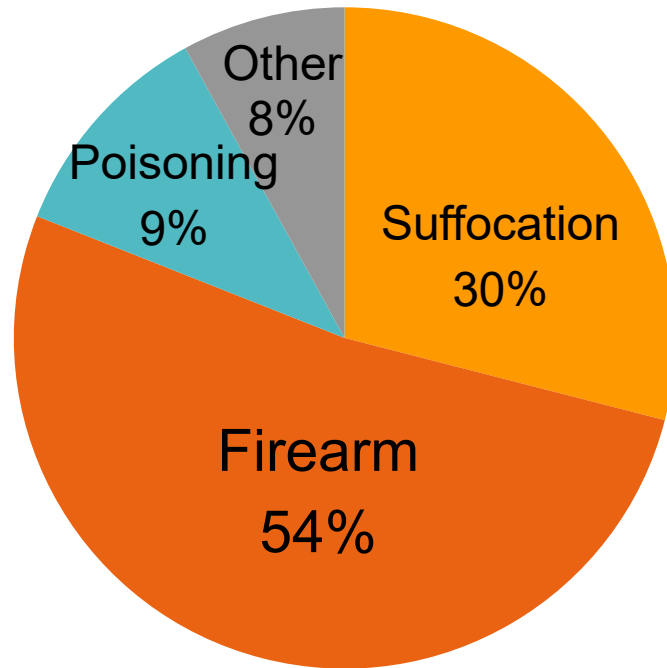
- ▶ Firearms and suicide: The rationale for lethal means safety
- ▶ Goals of lethal means safety counseling
- ▶ Potential storage options when providing lethal means firearm safety counseling
- ▶ DBT strategies to effectively target safe firearm storage
- ▶ Dialectics and validation strategies
- ▶ Using pros and cons to increase motivation

RATIONALE

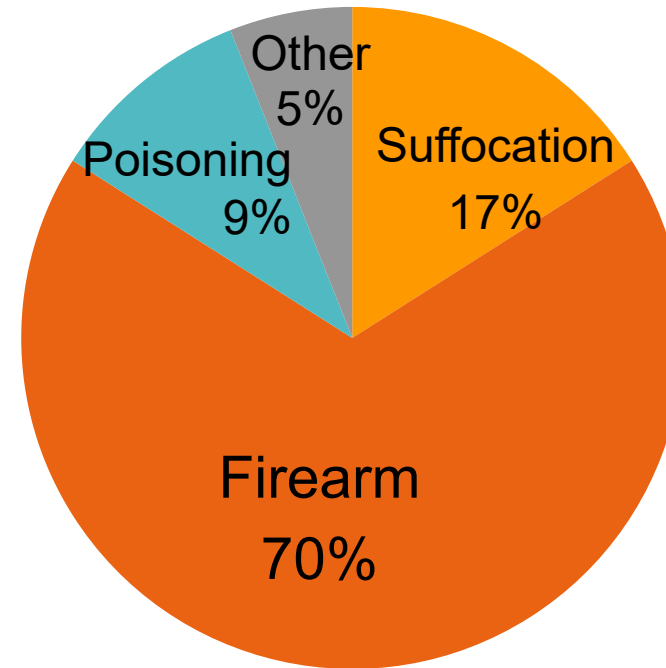
Why should VA providers talk to Veterans about firearms and suicide?

Suicide Methods in Males

Completed
Suicide in the
U.S.



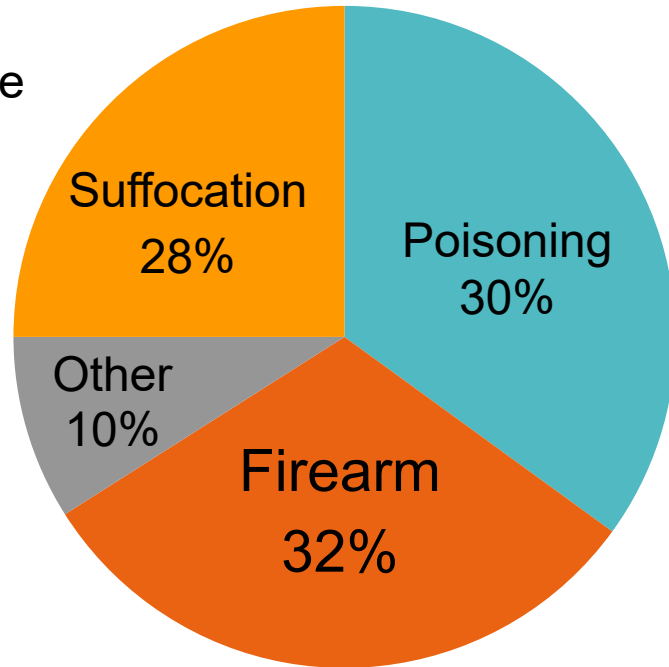
Completed
Veteran
Suicide



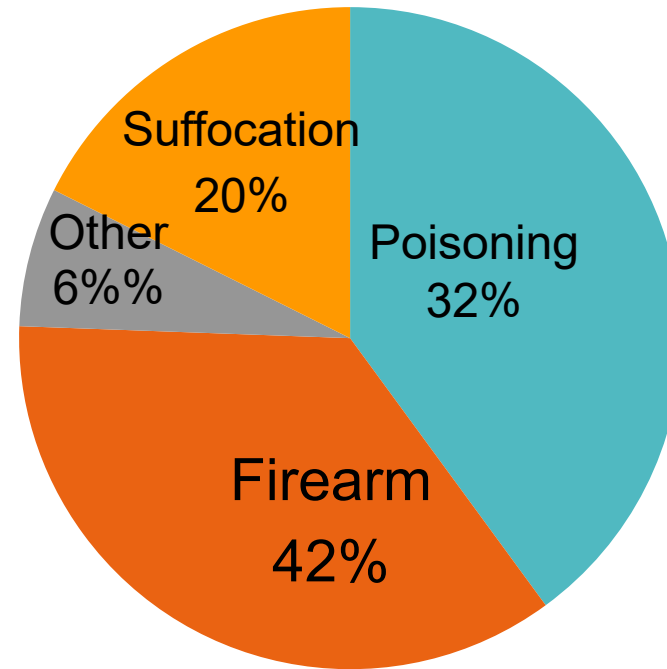
“VA National Suicide Data Report,” VHA Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, November 2020, page 29, Table 4.

Suicide Methods in Females

Completed
Suicide in the
U.S.



Completed
Veteran
Suicide



“VA National Suicide Data Report,” VHA Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, November 2020, page 29, Table 4.

Firearm Access is a Suicide Risk Factor

Suicide is 5x more common among firearm-owning households than in households where a firearm is not present.

- Correlation vs. causation: What's behind the relationship between suicide and gun access?
- Are people who have guns at higher risk for suicide for reasons other than simple availability?

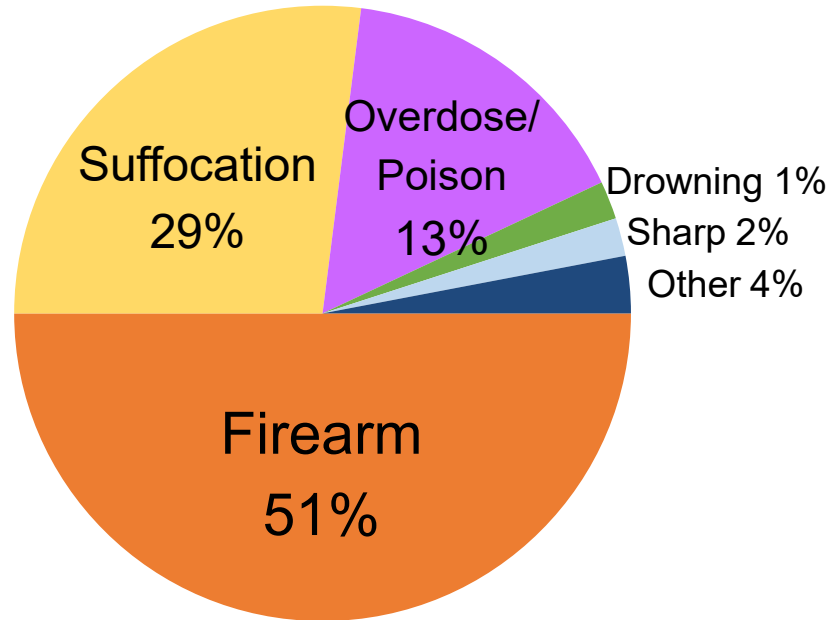
Are people who live in homes with guns more likely to have...

...experienced a mental health problem?	Yes	No
...seriously considered suicide?	Yes	No
...attempted suicide?	Yes	No

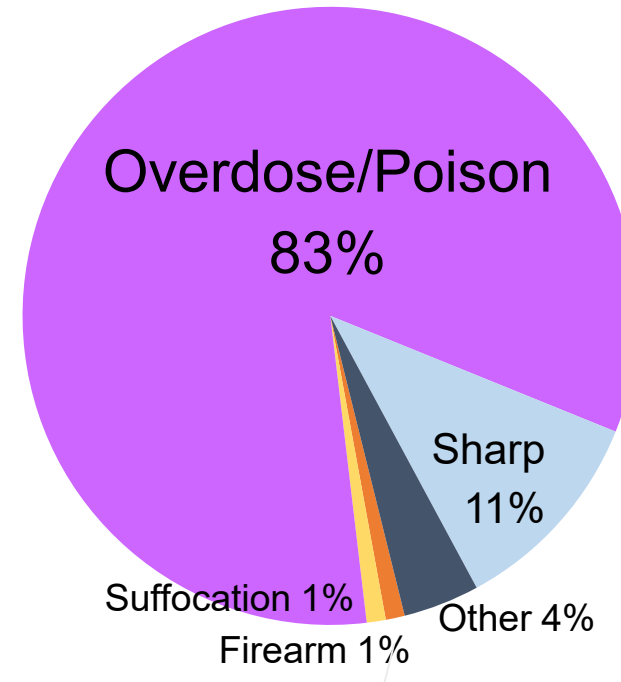
Sorenson et al. (2008). *Evaluation Review*, 32, 239-256; Ilgen et al. (2008). *General Hospital Psychiatry*, 30(6), 521-527; Miller et al. (2009). *Injury Prevention*, 15, 183-187; Betz et al. (2011). *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 41(4): 384-391. Simon (2007) *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 37, 518 –526; Studdert et al. (2020) *New England Journal of Medicine*, 382(23), 2220-2229.

Methods of Self Harm

Completed Suicide



Non-fatal Self-Injury



Suicide: Drapeau & MacIntosh (for Amer Assoc of Suicidology). USA Suicide 2018: Official Final Data. (2020).
Nonfatal self-inflicted injury: Health Care Utilization Project Nat'l Inpatient Sample (2005)

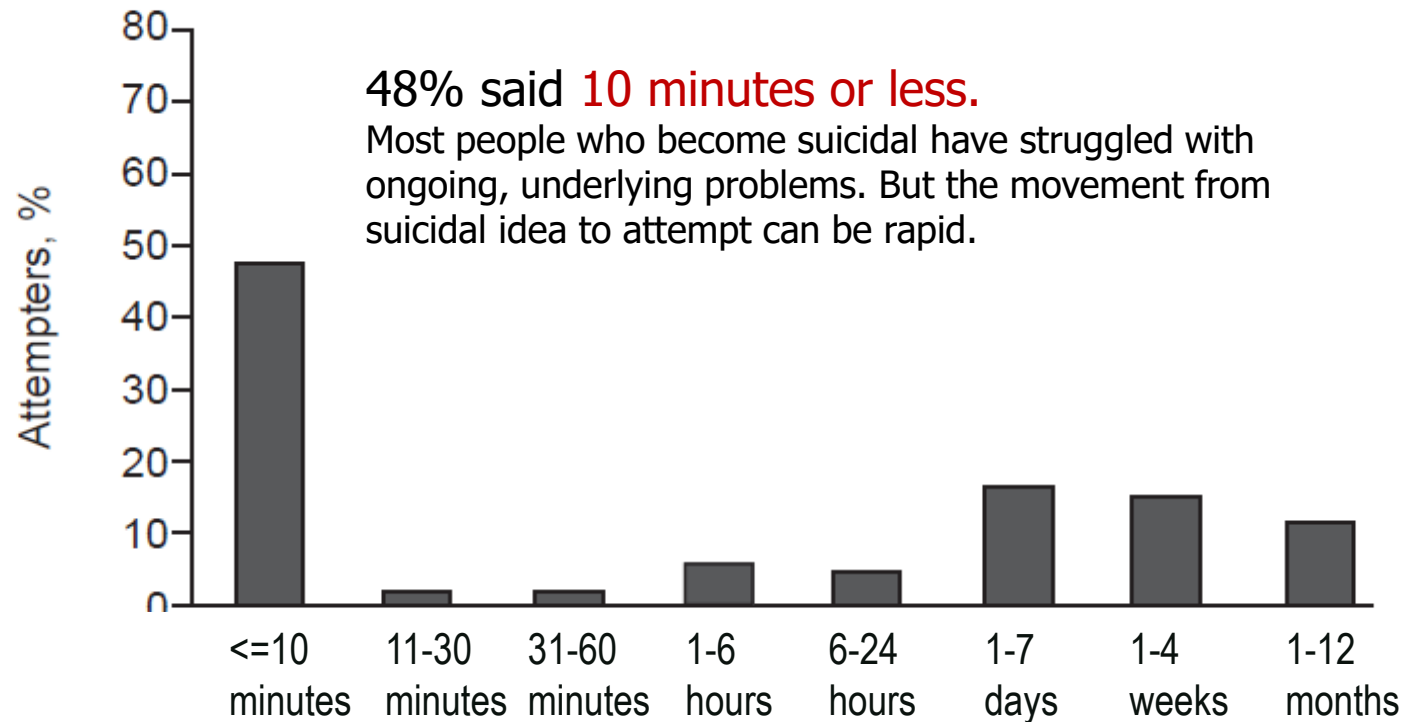
The Myth of Means Substitution

Reducing firearm access is likely to increase the probability of survival *even if* a patient does consider or even attempt by alternative means.

- ▶ Israeli Defense Force firearm policy change in 2006: **40%** reduction in suicide rate
- ▶ UK reduction in CO content in domestic coal gas in 1960s
- ▶ Sri Lanka pesticide restrictions in 1995 and 1998: suicide rate **halved**
- ▶ Individuals tend to have strong preferences for a single method

Duration of Suicidal Crises

People who attempted suicide were asked how long before the act they first thought about making the attempt:



Summary of Rationale

- ▶ Access to lethal means is an independent risk factor for suicide
- ▶ Firearms are significantly more lethal than other means
- ▶ Most people do not seek out alternative means if they cannot access their preferred means (e.g., their firearm)
- ▶ Suicidal crises are often brief

Building in time and space between the impulse to act and lethal means
can save lives!

A Road Map for Lethal Means Safety Counseling

1. Raise the firearms issue. Effective strategies vary, depending on the treatment context.
2. Collaborate on a plan to reduce access to firearms and lethal medications (and other methods as indicated).
3. If indicated, ask the patient for ROI for you to contact and work with a friend or family member.
4. Agree on roles (who's doing what?) and timetable for action.
5. Briefly document the plan in the Suicide Prevention Safety Plan (step 6, or addendum).
6. Follow up as indicated (at next appointment, or sooner!). Document follow up where it is easily accessible to future providers.

Goals of Lethal Means Safety Counseling

- ▶ Psychoeducation for the community
 - ▶ According to the CDC, suicides account for two-thirds of the total number of firearm-related deaths in the United States
 - ▶ Most firearm owners do not believe that firearm ownership and storage practices are significantly related to suicide (Anestis, Butterworth & Houtsma, 2018)

Friends don't let friends...have access to lethal means
when they're in emotional crisis!

Goals of Lethal Means Safety Counseling

- ▶ Ultimately, develop a **flexible approach to means storage that is responsive to fluctuations in levels of risk**. This requires...
 - ▶ Veteran to self-assess fluctuations in acute risk level
 - ▶ Mindfulness skills
 - ▶ Self-monitoring
 - ▶ Use *warning signs* listed in Step 1 of the Suicide Prevention Safety Plan
 - ▶ Veteran and counselor to *collaboratively* identify *patient-specific* options for increasing security of their firearm storage that they can deploy as needed
 - ▶ **Be specific.**

Goals of Lethal Means Safety Counseling

- ▶ Strive to provide a clear, transparent rationale
- ▶ Join with them around the shared goal of safety
- ▶ Broadly, placing “decision points” between suicidal impulses and suicide behaviors. (The goal is to interrupt impulsive action.)
- ▶ Underscore the temporary and flexible nature of what you’re proposing: The goal is not to have every Veteran store firearms out of the home at all times
- ▶ Analogies may be helpful (e.g., drinking and driving)

Safety hierarchy of storage options

1. Temporarily storing guns away from home.
2. Locking the firearm *and*...
 - Giving key to someone or storing key in a bank safe deposit box.
 - Asking someone to change safe combination.
 - Temporarily disabling gun, e.g., giving a component of gun, such as firing pin, to someone.
 - Storing ammunition out of the home.


See National Shooting Sports Foundation or lokitup.org for locking options.

Safety hierarchy of storage options



3. If other options are not possible:
 - A locked gun poses a lower suicide risk than an unlocked gun, no matter who holds the key (can use cable locks, trigger locks, safes).
 - An unloaded gun (ammunition stored separately) poses a lower suicide risk than a loaded gun.
4. Hiding guns is not recommended.

See National Shooting Sports Foundation or lokitup.org for locking options.



Any step(s) that increase the time and distance between a suicidal impulse and a gun can reduce suicide risk.

Firearms Off-Site Storage Options

- **Relatives** *: Provided they aren't prohibited from possessing firearms; short-term loan.
- **Storage facility**: Ammunition must be stored separately.
- **Police departments** *: Some will store temporarily at no charge—check with local PD. Most PDs offer disposal service if person no longer wants their guns.
- **Pawn shops** *: Pawning the guns for a very small loan amount is reliable storage option; interest fees of ~15-20% monthly.
- **Gun stores** * or **gun clubs**: Some may offer free or inexpensive storage options.

Note: Transport guns unloaded in a locked box.

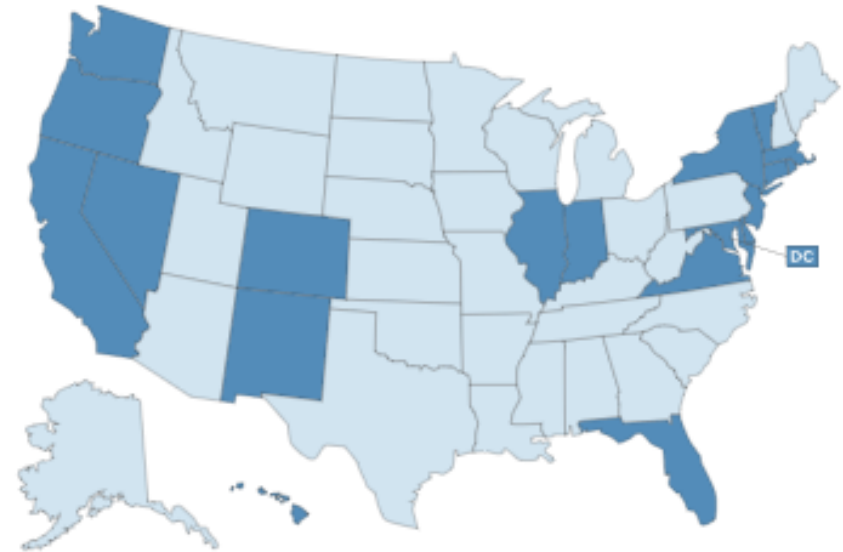
* These options require a formal transfer. In virtually all states, the owner will need to go through a background check to retrieve the guns.

Know the laws in your state:

- ▶ Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence: <http://smartgunlaws.org>
- ▶ Everytown for Gun Safety's Gun Law Navigator: <https://everytownresearch.org/navigator>
- ▶ The Giffords Law Center: <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/>

Know the laws in your state:

- ▶ Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOS)
 - ▶ Create a legal mechanism to temporarily remove firearms from individuals at elevated risk
 - ▶ Modeled after domestic violence restraining orders and afford similar due process protections
 - ▶ For every 10-20 firearm removal order issued, one suicide is prevented
 - ▶ 19 states and the District of Columbia have extreme risk laws.



The Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence, 2020



TIPS AND TRICKS
FROM DBT



Keeping the Veteran
in the conversation:
How to stay
collaborative and
make progress

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)

- ▶ Designed for people at elevated chronic risk of suicide
- ▶ Addresses mood dependent behavior
 - ▶ Many suicide attempts are impulsive and emotion-driven
 - ▶ “I feel it, I do it!”
 - ▶ Learn emotion regulation skills to engage in values-driven behavior vs. mood dependent behavior
- ▶ Specific tools to manage tense clinical interactions (e.g., validation)

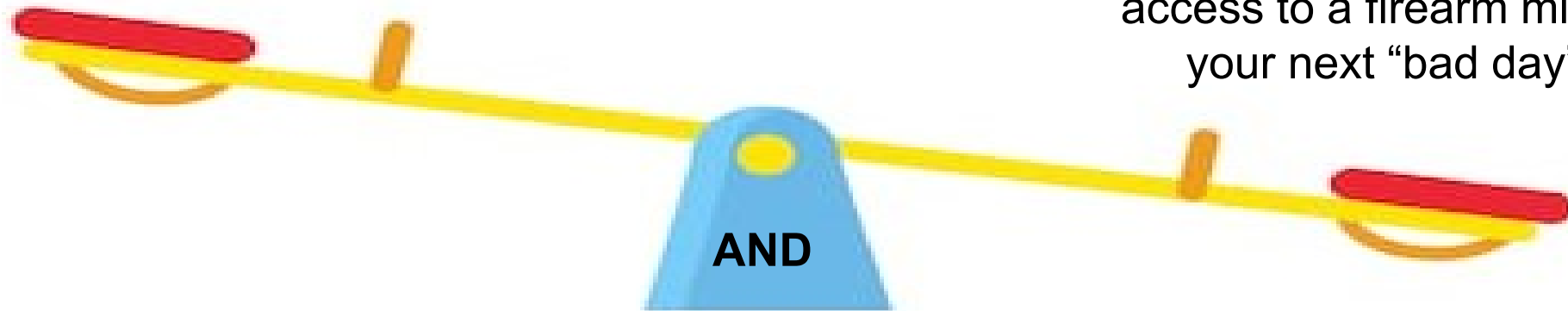
Language Matters

- ▶ “**Lethal means *safety***” more acceptable to participants than “lethal means *restriction*”
- ▶ Preference for the word “**firearm**” over “gun”
- ▶ “Firearm Safety” is traditionally used to refer to basic safety measures for shooting. “Lethal Means Safety” or “Firearm Suicide Safety” can be alternatives.

Dialectics: Balancing Acceptance and Change (DBT style)

Temporarily giving up your firearm when you rely on it for self-protection is really scary!

You're really worried about your safety and know that having easy access to a firearm might make your next "bad day" fatal.



Validation (DBT-style)

- ▶ Confirming that which is true, accurate, and understandable given the person's current situation or past history
- ▶ Finding wisdom/ correctness in client's response – “Kernel of truth”
- ▶ Communicates acceptance
- ▶ Why validate?
 - ▶ Validation can lead to a reduction in negative affect, can promote more disclosures of emotional states, and can improve emotion regulation skills (Fruzzetti & Shenk, 2008)
 - ▶ Validation can be effective in lowering negative mood and aggression (Kim and Kim, 2013)

What you can always validate

- ▶ Their pain
- ▶ The difficulty of solving their problem
- ▶ Their experience as it looks to them
- ▶ Struggle with their own biology



Common examples of validation in effective LMSC ?

- ▶ Validation example:
 - ▶ Guns are a really important part of your relationship with your sons
 - ▶ Your worry about a home invasion makes sense given that you were robbed three times last year!
- ▶ How validation can facilitate change:
 - ▶ Guns are a really important part of your relationship with your sons, AND you care about your family so much you don't want to put them through your suicide
 - ▶ You'd like to have your firearm on hand in case of a home invasion, AND it's sounding like your suicide risk may be higher than the risk of a home invasion right at this moment
- ▶ What is NOT validation:
 - ▶ You shouldn't have access to guns how you're feeling.
 - ▶ Guns may be important to you BUT you're at risk of suicide.

Using Pros and Cons: Example

Pros of Decreasing Firearm Access	Cons of Decreasing Firearm Access
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduced risk of suicide• Reduced risk of accidental child death	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More anxiety about home invasion• Might be embarrassing to tell my buddies I can't go shooting
Pros of Maintaining Current Storage	Cons of Maintaining Current Storage
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Easy not to change (inertia)• Can still go shooting with my buddies this weekend	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• My therapist and family members will worry about me• Higher risk of impulsive suicide



QUESTIONS?



Email us for the slides or more
information:

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