

Pearls: Revised ‘SAD PERSONS’ helps assess suicide risk

By: *William H. Campbell, MD*

The SAD PERSONS scale, an acronym based on 10 suicide risk factors,¹ has found widespread acceptance in assessing the likelihood of a suicide attempt. It also has been adapted for use with children.²

However, a major risk factor omitted from the scale is the availability of a lethal means for suicide, such as a firearm, stockpiled medication, or other potentially lethal item. In particular, where firearm ownership levels are higher, a disproportionately higher number of people die from suicide.³

Include ‘Availability of lethal means’

SAD PERSONS can be modified to “SAD PERSONAS” to remedy this omission, with the second ‘A’ representing “Availability of lethal means” (*Table 1*). This modification reminds the clinician to ask about lethal means when assessing suicidality. If lethal means are available, the clinician can then take whatever action is reasonably indicated to reduce the likelihood of a suicide.

Eliminate scoring

Because the listed risk factors are not equivalent with regard to suicide potential, a second modification is to eliminate scoring. In SAD PERSONS, one point is scored for each risk factor. Consider these two patients:

¹ Patterson WM, Dohn HH, Bird J, Petterson GA. Evaluation of suicidal patients: the SAD PERSONS scale. *Psychosomatics* 1983;24:343-9.

² Juhne GA. The adapted-SAD PERSONS: a suicide assessment scale designed for use with children. *Elementary School Guidance & Counseling* 1996;30:252-8.

³ Miller M, Azrael D, Hemenway D. Household firearm ownership and suicide rates in the United States. *Epidemiology* 2002;13:517-24.

Table 1

Modified SAD PERSONAS scale

Sex
Age
Depression

Previous attempt
Ethanol abuse
Rational thinking loss
Social supports lacking
Organized plan
No spouse
Availability of lethal means
Sickness

Eliminating scoring. Consider risk factors within the context of the clinical presentation.

- A man who is depressed and has an organized plan to shoot himself with his handgun
- An elderly widower who has dementia and is physically ill.

Both men would score a 4, but the risk of suicide would be substantially greater in the first case. Suicide risk factors are qualitative – not quantitative – measures and should be considered within the overall context of the clinical presentation.

Dr. Campbell is assistant professor, department of psychiatry, Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine, Cleveland, OH, and is clinical directors, division of ambulatory care, department of psychiatry, University of Cleveland.