

## Reducing Environment-of-Care Risks for Behavioral Health Patients

Managing risks in the environment of care is an essential patient safety strategy in all types of healthcare settings, but particularly in behavioral health units and facilities. In these settings, seemingly innocuous items can be hazardous if patients use them to inflict self-harm or to harm others. As suicide rates have steadily increased over the years,<sup>1</sup> and concerns about violence in healthcare have escalated, healthcare facilities continue to develop best practices for safeguarding the environment of care.

The following list of considerations<sup>2</sup> is intended to help healthcare providers and staff members working in behavioral health units and facilities assess potential environmental risks and identify areas for improvement. Although this checklist is not all-inclusive, it provides key areas for consideration and can be used along with relevant regulatory codes, standards, and professional guidelines to reduce environmental risks.

	Yes	No
<i>Policies/Procedures</i>		
Does your organization have a written policy/procedure for screening patients and visitors for potentially hazardous items? Is this policy consistently implemented?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does your organization have a written policy/procedure for inventorying and documenting patients' personal items at admission and periodically?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does your organization have a written policy/procedure for conducting periodic searches of patients' rooms and personal items? Is this policy consistently implemented, and are patients and families educated about it?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does your organization have policies and procedures that address the use of restraints, seclusion, suicide precautions, and de-escalation?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Yes	No
<b><i>Policies/Procedures (continued)</i></b>		
<p>Does your organization have clear guidelines about restricted items, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clothing items and accessories that could be used to inflict self-harm or harm others (e.g., shoelaces, drawstrings, scarves, ties, belts, hangers, and jewelry)?</li> <li>• Personal electronic devices (e.g., phones, laptops, tablets, and cameras)?</li> <li>• Items that could be used to puncture or cut skin (e.g., pens, metal utensils and sharp plastic utensils, combs with sharp teeth, pushpins and tacks, scissors, knitting needles, glass plates and cups, and razors)?</li> <li>• Certain personal care items (e.g., alcohol-based products, corded devices, products containing potentially dangerous chemicals, and aerosol containers)?</li> <li>• Products that are fire hazards (e.g., matches and lighters)?</li> <li>• Illicit substances (e.g., alcohol, illegal drugs, and unauthorized prescription or over-the-counter medications)?</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>  <input type="checkbox"/>  <input type="checkbox"/>  <input type="checkbox"/>  <input type="checkbox"/>  <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>  <input type="checkbox"/>  <input type="checkbox"/>  <input type="checkbox"/>  <input type="checkbox"/>
Do trained staff members assess the environment of care on a set schedule to identify potential hazards?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are staff members given wearable panic buttons or real-time location devices to help pinpoint the location of an incident? Are these devices regularly tested?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are staff members issued tear-away identification badges or badges that do not go around the neck? Do badges include only staff members' first names?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does your organization have a plan for providing ongoing staff education about environment-of-care issues and raising awareness about potential hazards and best practices for reducing risk?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b><i>General Spaces and Structures</i></b>		
Are efforts made to eliminate physical barriers that create obstructed views of common areas (e.g., lobbies, lounges, dining areas, corridors, etc.)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are safeguards such as security mirrors and video surveillance systems in place, particularly in areas where obstructed views cannot be eliminated?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Yes	No
<b><i>General Spaces and Structures (continued)</i></b>		
Are fixed panic buttons available in locations that are not visible from the nursing station? Are these devices regularly tested?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are structures (e.g., walls, flooring, molding, etc.) permanently fixed to prevent patients from concealing potentially harmful substances and objects?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is vinyl baseboard secured to the wall so that it cannot be easily removed or used as a weapon?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are surfaces (e.g., walls) coated with nontoxic substances in case patients ingest the coating?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are walls, floors, upholstery, and décor selected that do not use color combinations, patterns, or materials that might cause visual misperceptions (e.g., reflective surfaces or patterns that cause optical illusions)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are medication storage areas, supply closets/cabinets, and unoccupied rooms locked?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are cleaning supplies and chemicals secured? Do housekeeping carts have locks?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do appliances (e.g., refrigerators, microwaves, water dispensers, coffee-makers, etc.) have lock-out functions? Are they free from ligature risks if they are in areas in which patients might be unsupervised?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If outdoor areas are available, are they routinely evaluated for environmental safety hazards? Are patients and family members educated about appropriate use of outside areas?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are all wall-mounted exposed room thermostats removed from patient areas?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are all tamper-resistant screws checked quarterly to ensure that they are still tight and do not create an anchor point for hanging?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are any racks free of parts or pieces that can be removed and used as a weapon? Are racks secured to the wall with tamper-resistant fasteners?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Yes	No
<b><i>Furniture/Closets</i></b>		
Is furniture secured to the floor to prevent it from being moved?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is furniture devoid of sharp edges and difficult to dismantle?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is furniture selected that is free from anchor points (e.g., bedposts and cabinet handles) to prevent hanging attempts?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is upholstered furniture made of nontoxic, nonflammable, easy-to-clean material?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are doors on closets or wardrobe cabinets removed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are closets and dressers that contain clothing or linens kept locked to prevent patients from using the items to attempt suicide or inflict harm?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b><i>Bedding</i></b>		
Are platform beds used, and are they secured to the floor?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are electric beds and beds with rails avoided when not medically necessary?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are mattresses free from zippers, cording, and internal components that could be used to inflict harm?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are bedsheets free from elastic hemming, and are they tear-resistant?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do pillows have covers that cannot be removed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b><i>Lighting and Fixtures</i></b>		
Are lamps, televisions, and other moveable fixtures securely attached to furniture or walls?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are hinges, light fixtures, and sprinklers recessed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are electrical cords and phone cords restricted? When used, are they secured and limited to fewer than 12 inches?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do lighting and signage have protective covering that cannot be broken?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are light bulbs made from shatter-resistant glass?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Yes	No
<i>Doors and Windows</i>		
Do entry ways have two sets of lockable doors to create anterooms?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do counseling and treatment rooms have doors with locks and two exits?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do door hinges allow for doors to be opened in either direction (if permitted by building codes)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do doors have handles and latches that point down? Are they designed so they cannot be tied together?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are ligature-resistant lock sets used on doors requiring locks?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do corridor doors to patient sleeping rooms have over-the-door alarms?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are all the over-the-door alarms checked twice a year to ensure they are operating properly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are doors free of hold-open devices and self-closers that could be used as anchor points for hanging?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are door thresholds secured to the floor and no higher than 3/4-inch above the floor? Are door thresholds secured using tamper-resistant anchors or fasteners?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are all windows made of unbreakable glass or acrylic?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are windows locked or do they open less than 4 inches? Are security screens used?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are window blinds free from cords, hooks, and weight-bearing rods?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are window coverings flame retardant?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are window coverings designed so they cannot be used for hanging?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are windows inspected at least twice a year to ensure locking mechanisms have not been compromised?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is the hardware supporting the window covering designed and installed in a way that prevents it from being used as an anchor point?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Yes	No
<b>Bathrooms</b>		
Are breakaway rods and racks used for shower curtains, towel bars, and closets?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are toilets wall-mounted with concealed plumbing?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are toilet flush valves recessed in the wall and activated by push button or securely enclosed and activated by push button? Are toilets low flow?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are showerheads, faucets, and other plumbing designed to prevent being broken off and to avoid ligature risks?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are ligature-resistant grab bars used for patients who are at risk of falling?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are temperature controls for water restricted?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are soap dispensers, paper towel dispensers, hand dryers, and toilet paper dispensers secured to the wall without removable wall mounting?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is nontoxic soap used in case patients ingest it?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are collapsible, nonweight-bearing trash cans used, and are plastic liners prohibited?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Electrical Outlets</b>		
Do electrical outlets have protective, secure covers?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are receptacles and switches covered by metal plates that are secured by tamper-resistant screws?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are the electrical boxes flush mounted?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are all receptacles provided with ground-fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) protection?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning Vents</b>		
Are heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) vents flush with the wall?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do HVAC vents have protective, secure covers or are they secured with tamper-resistant screws?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are louvers designed so that they cannot be used as anchor points?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Yes	No
<b>Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning Vents (continued)</b>		
Are floor-mounted HVAC vents removed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are vents designed without sharp edges to prevent self-harm?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Wall Items</b>		
Are wall decorations made of unbreakable material? Are they secured to the walls using tamper-resistant screws or anchors and placed out of patients' reach?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are bulletin boards, message boards, posters, telephones, door stops, exit signs, and lights secured to the walls using tamper-resistant screws?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are all alcohol dispensers removed from the walls in patient areas?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are corner mirrors secured with tamper-resistant screws and flush mounted so that they cannot serve as anchor points?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Has all surface-mounted wire molding been removed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Ceilings</b>		
Are ceilings (particularly in patient rooms and seclusion rooms) constructed of solid material rather than removable tiles to prevent patients from accessing anchor points and concealing contraband?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are ceilings free of hanging objects such as plant hangers and wind chimes?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are ceiling tiles and access panels checked twice a year to ensure that are secure and that patients cannot access the ceiling?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are access doors in solid ceilings locked using a key or special tool to prevent unauthorized access and secured to the ceiling using tamper-resistant fasteners?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are light fixtures flush mounted in the ceiling, tamper-resistant, and provided with break-resistant panels or covers?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are institutional fire sprinklers used to prevent them being used as anchor points?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are vents in the ceiling flush mounted with the ceiling surface and secured with tamper-resistant fasteners?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018, October 3). *Suicide mortality in the United States, 1999–2017*. Retrieved from [www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db330.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db330.htm)

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (2018, November). Mental health environment of care checklist. VA National Center for Patient Safety. Retrieved from [www.patientsafety.va.gov/professionals/onthejob/mentalhealth.asp](http://www.patientsafety.va.gov/professionals/onthejob/mentalhealth.asp); McMurray, K. N., Hunt, J. M., & Sine, D. M. (2020, November). *Behavioral health design guide*. Behavioral Health Facility Consulting. Retrieved from <https://www.bhfcllc.com/>; Knoll IV, J. L. (2012, May). Inpatient suicide: Identifying vulnerability in the hospital setting. *Psychiatric Times*, 30(6). Retrieved from [www.psychiatrictimes.com/suicide/inpatient-suicide-identifying-vulnerability-hospital-setting](http://www.psychiatrictimes.com/suicide/inpatient-suicide-identifying-vulnerability-hospital-setting); Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority. (2007, September). Diligence and design in behavioral health impact patient safety. *PA PSRS Patient Safety Advisory*, 4(3), 78-82. Retrieved from [http://patientsafety.pa.gov/ADVISORIES/Pages/200709\\_78.aspx](http://patientsafety.pa.gov/ADVISORIES/Pages/200709_78.aspx); Minnesota Department of Health, Stratis Health, & Minnesota Hospital Association. (2015, October). *Suicide prevention in healthcare facilities: Environmental safety recommendations*. Retrieved from [www.health.state.mn.us/facilities/patientsafety/adverseevents/publications/suicideprevhealthcarefac.pdf](http://www.health.state.mn.us/facilities/patientsafety/adverseevents/publications/suicideprevhealthcarefac.pdf); U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (2014). *Environmental Programs Service mental health guide*. Retrieved from [www.patientsafety.va.gov/docs/joe/eps\\_mental\\_health\\_guide.pdf](http://www.patientsafety.va.gov/docs/joe/eps_mental_health_guide.pdf)

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