

Sample Self-Directed Violence Assessment Skills Syllabus With Embedded Deliberate Practice Exercises

APPENDIX



This appendix provides a sample one-semester, three-unit course dedicated to teaching self-directed violence assessment skills. This course is appropriate for graduate students (master's and doctoral) at all levels of training, including first-year students who have not yet worked with clients. We present it as a model that can be adopted to a specific program's contexts and needs. For example, instructors may borrow portions of it to use in other courses, in practica, in didactic training events at externships and internships, in workshops, and in continuing education for postgraduate therapists.

Course Title: Self-Directed Violence Assessment Skills: Theory and Deliberate Practice

This course teaches theory, principles, and core skills of self-directed violence (SDV) assessment skills. As a course with both didactic and practicum elements, it will review the theory and research on SDV; best practices in the assessment and treatment of clients exhibiting SDV behaviors, including suicidality and other forms of self-harming behaviors; and foster the use of deliberate practice to enable students to acquire 10 key SDV assessment skills.

Course Objectives

Students who complete this course will be able to

1. describe the core theory, research, and skills necessary to assess and care more effectively for clients demonstrating SDV thoughts and behaviors;
2. apply the principles of deliberate practice for career-long clinical skill development;
3. demonstrate key SDV assessment skills;
4. evaluate how they can integrate SDV assessment skills into their developing therapeutic framework;
5. employ SDV assessment skills with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds; and
6. demonstrate how SDV assessment skills are grounded in evidence-based practices.

Date	Lecture and Discussion	Skills Lab	Homework (For Next Class)
Week 1	Introduction to self-directed violence (SDV) psychotherapy theory, history, and research; understanding the rationale for deliberate practice	Introduction to principles of deliberate practice	Bryan (2022, Chapters 1–2); Jobes (2023, Chapter 1); Rocky Mountain MIRECC, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2015)
Week 2	Learning to ask clarifying questions and using complex reflections to increase understanding	Exercise 1: Exploring the Meaning of Client Statements	Sommers-Flanagan (2018); Sommers-Flanagan and Sommers-Flanagan (2021, Chapter 1)
Week 3	Understanding SDV risk factors and precursors to SDV behaviors	Exercise 2: Assessing Precipitating Factors	Bryan (2022, Chapter 3); Jobes (2023, Chapter 4)
Week 4	Practicing how to ask questions that help clarify the intensity of and seriousness of SDV statements	Exercise 3: Asking Scaling Questions	Sommers-Flanagan and Sommers-Flanagan (2021, Chapter 3)
Week 5	Learning the importance of social support in reducing risk for suicide	Exercise 4: Exploring and Encouraging Social Support	Sommers-Flanagan and Sommers-Flanagan (2021, Chapter 6)
Week 6	Learning the crucial components of an SDV safety plan and how to introduce these plans to a client	Exercise 5: Safety Planning	Sommers-Flanagan and Sommers-Flanagan (2021, Chapter 9); Stanley and Brown (2012)
Week 7	Learning how to use motivational interviewing and other strategies designed to resolve client ambivalence	Exercise 6: Working With Ambivalence	Britton et al. (2011); Sommers-Flanagan and Sommers-Flanagan (2021, Chapter 5); Teismann et al. (2024)
Week 8	Discussion of common measures used in assessing SDV and how to introduce measures to clients	Exercise 7: Using Self-Directed Violence Assessment Measures	Jobes (2023, Chapters 2 and 4)
Week 9	Midterm paper due, self-evaluation, and skill coaching feedback	Transcript session or mock therapy session (Exercise 11 or 12)	Sommers-Flanagan and Sommers-Flanagan (2021, Chapters 4, 7, and 8)
Week 10	Developing confidence in talking about SDV with clients	Exercise 8: Providing Rationales for Focusing on Self-Directed Violence	Bryan (2022, Chapter 6); Jobes (2023, Chapters 5 and 6)
Week 11	Identifying and responding to therapeutic alliance ruptures	Exercise 9: Responding to Ruptures in the Therapeutic Alliance	Bloch-Elkouby and Barzilay (2022)
Week 12	Learn ethical and legal guidelines related to SDV and how to communicate these responsibilities to clients	Exercise 10: Communicating Therapist Boundaries and Responsibilities	Knapp (2024); Sommers-Flanagan and Sommers-Flanagan (2021, Chapter 3)
Week 13	Evidence-based psychotherapy practices with clients exhibiting SDV thoughts and behaviors; collaborative assessment and management of suicidality	Exercise 11: Annotated Transcript of Self-Directed Violence Assessment in a Psychotherapy Session	Jobes (2023, Chapters 6 and 7); Swift et al. (2021); Zerler (2008)
Week 14	Self-care and emotional regulation in working with clients exhibiting SDV symptoms	Exercise 12: Mock Sessions for Self-Directed Violence Assessment in Psychotherapy	Scupham and Goss (2020)
Week 15	Final paper due, final exam, self-evaluation, and skill coaching feedback	Repeat either Exercise 11 or 12: transcript session or mock therapy session	None

Format of Class

Classes are 3 hours long. Course time is split evenly between learning the rationale for certain SDV assessment skills and applying these skills using the deliberate practice model:

Lecture/Discussion Class: Each week, there will be one lecture/discussion class for 1.5 hours focusing on SDV theory and related research.

SDV Assessment Skills Lab: Each week, there will be one SDV assessment skills lab for 1.5 hours. Skills labs are for practicing SDV assessment skills using the exercises in this book. The exercises use therapy simulations (role plays) with the following goals:

1. Build trainees' skill and confidence for using SDV assessment skills with real clients.
2. Provide a safe space for experimenting with different therapeutic interventions, without fear of making mistakes.
3. Provide plenty of opportunity to explore and "try on" different styles of therapy, so trainees can ultimately discover their own personal, unique therapy style.

Mock Sessions: Multiple weeks in the semester, trainees will do a psychotherapy mock session in the SDV assessment skills lab. In contrast to highly structured and repetitive deliberate practice exercises, a psychotherapy mock session is an unstructured and improvised role-played therapy session. Mock sessions let trainees

1. practice using SDV assessment skills responsively,
2. experiment with clinical decision making in an unscripted context,
3. discover their personal therapeutic style, and
4. build endurance for working with real clients.

Homework

Homework will be assigned each week and will include reading, 1 hour of skills practice with an assigned practice partner, and occasional writing assignments. For the skills practice homework, trainees will repeat the exercise they did for that week's SDV assessment skills lab. Because the instructor will not be there to evaluate performance, trainees should instead complete the Deliberate Practice Reaction Form, as well as the Deliberate Practice Diary Form, as a self-evaluation.

Writing Assignments

Students are to write two papers, one due at midterm and one due on the last day of class. Some possible topics for the papers are as follows:

- A partial transcript of one of the trainees' therapy cases with a real client, with discussion of how they integrated SDV assessment skills into their work
- Description of the role of protective factors in SDV assessment
- Exploration of the client experience of SDV assessment and its implications for treatment
- Examination of cultural considerations in SDV assessment, including how aspects of cultural identities, values, beliefs, practices, etc. influence SDV presentation and assessment

Practitioner Self-Care

The topic of SDV, specifically suicide, can be emotionally challenging even for the most experienced therapist. Over the course of your career, you will likely be faced with many clients who present with suicidal thoughts and behaviors. In taking this class, we will be asking you to come into "contact" with varying levels of serious suicidal thinking and readings about suicide. Sometimes reading and responding to this type of contact can trigger strong emotional reactions, so it is critical from the outset of your training that you begin to think through your vulnerabilities around this subject matter and develop steps to take care of yourself in this course and throughout your career. Some of you may have lived experiences of SDV or experienced some form of it with family members or friends. As we progress through the class, we will take time to process reactions to course content, and we encourage you to seek support and engage in self-care as needed.

Vulnerability, Privacy, and Boundaries

This course is aimed at developing SDV assessment skills, self-awareness, and interpersonal skills in an experiential framework and as relevant to clinical work. This course is not psychotherapy or a substitute for psychotherapy. Students should interact at a level of self-disclosure that is personally comfortable and helpful to their own learning. Although becoming aware of internal emotional and psychological processes is necessary for a therapist's development, it is not necessary to reveal all that information to the trainer. It is important for students to sense their own level of safety and privacy. Students are not evaluated on the level of material that they choose to reveal in the class.

In accordance with the *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (APA, 2017), **students are not required to disclose personal information**. Because this class is about developing both interpersonal and SDV assessment skills competence, following are some important points so that students are fully informed as they make choices to self-disclose:

- Students choose how much, when, and what to disclose. Students are not penalized for the choice not to share personal information.
- The learning environment is susceptible to group dynamics much like any other group space, and therefore students may be asked to share their observations and experiences of the class environment with the singular goal of fostering a more inclusive and productive learning environment.

Confidentiality

To create a safe learning environment that is respectful of client and therapist information and diversity and to foster open and vulnerable conversation in class, students are required to agree to strict confidentiality within and outside of the instruction setting.

Evaluation

Self-Evaluation: At midterm (Week 9) and at the end of the semester (Week 15), trainees will perform a self-evaluation. This will help trainees track their progress and identify areas for further development. The Guidance for Trainees section in Chapter 3 of this book highlights potential areas of focus for self-evaluation.

Grading Criteria

As designed, students would be accountable for the level and quality of their performance in

- the discussion classes,
- the skills lab (exercises and mock sessions),
- homework,
- midterm and final papers, and
- a final exam.

Required Readings

- Bloch-Elkouby, S., & Barzilay, S. (2022). Alliance-focused safety planning and suicide risk management. *Psychotherapy, 59*(2), 157–162. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pst0000416>
- Britton, P. C., Patrick, H., Wenzel, A., & Williams, G. C. (2011). Integrating motivational interviewing and self-determination theory with cognitive behavioral therapy to prevent suicide. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice, 18*(1), 16–27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2009.06.004>
- Bryan, C. J. (2022). *Rethinking suicide: Why prevention fails, and how we can do better*. Oxford University Press
- Jobes, D. A. (2023). *Managing suicidal risk: A collaborative approach* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Knapp, S. (2024). Laws, risk management, and ethical principles when working with suicidal patients. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 55*(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pro0000554>
- Rocky Mountain MIRECC, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (2015). *Self-Directed Violence System and Clinical Toolkit*. <https://mirecc.va.gov/vsn19/clinical/nomenclature.asp>
- Scupham, S., & Goss, S. P. (2020). Working with suicidal clients: Psychotherapists and allied professionals speak about their experiences. *Counselling & Psychotherapy Research, 20*(3), 525–534. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12288>
- Sommers-Flanagan, J. (2018). Conversations about suicide: Strategies for detecting and assessing suicide risk. *Journal of Health Service Psychology, 44*(1), 33–45. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03544661>
- Sommers-Flanagan, J., & Sommers-Flanagan, R. (2021). *Suicide assessment and treatment planning: A strengths-based approach*. American Counseling Association.
- Stanley, B., & Brown, G. K. (2012). Safety planning intervention: A brief intervention to mitigate suicide risk. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice, 19*(2), 256–264. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2011.01.001>
- Swift, J. K., Trusty, W. T., & Penix, E. A. (2021). The effectiveness of the Collaborative Assessment and Management of Suicidality (CAMS) compared to alternative treatment conditions: A meta-analysis. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior, 51*(5), 882–896. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.12765>
- Teismann, T., Siebert, A. M., & Forkmann, T. (2024). Suicidal ambivalence: A scoping review. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.13092>

Zerler, H. (2008). Motivational interviewing and suicidality. In H. Arkowitz, H. A. Westra, W. R. Miller, & S. Rollnick (Eds.), *Motivational interviewing in the treatment of psychological problems* (pp. 173–193). Guilford Press.

Supplemental Readings

Bryan, C. J., & Rudd, M. D. (2018). *Brief cognitive-behavioral therapy for suicide prevention*. Guilford Press.

Flynn, H., & Naar, S. (2025). Motivational interviewing in the treatment of depression. In B. L. Burke, B. Lundahl, & H. Arkowitz (Eds.), *Motivational interviewing in the treatment of psychological problems* (3rd ed., pp. 118–143). Guilford Press.

Reeves, A. (2010). *Counselling suicidal clients*. Sage Publications.

Reeves, A. (2016). *Working with risk in counselling and psychotherapy*. Sage Publications.

Sommers-Flanagan, J. (2020). Conversations about suicide: Strategies for detecting and assessing suicide risk. *Journal of Health Service Psychology*, 44(1), 33–45. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03544661>

Sommers-Flanagan, J., & Shaw, S. L. (2017). Suicide risk assessment: What psychologists should know. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 48(2), 98–106. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pro0000106>

Suicide Prevention Resource Center. (2020). *Safety planning guide: A quick guide for clinicians*. <https://sprc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/SafetyPlanningGuide-Quick-Guide-for-Clinicians.pdf>