

Suicide Prevention Resource Center

<http://www.sprc.org/>

This was adapted from "**Understanding Risk and Protective Factors for Suicide**" and "**Risk and protective factors for suicide**" by the Suicide Prevention Resource Center.

Risk factors are often confused with warning signs of suicide, and frequently suicide prevention materials mix the two into lists of "what to watch out for." It is important to note, however, that factors identified as increasing risk are not factors that cause or predict a suicide attempt. Risk factors are characteristics that make it more likely that an individual will consider, attempt, or die by suicide. Protective factors are characteristics that make it less likely that individuals will consider, attempt, or die by suicide.

Risk Factors for Suicide

- Mental disorders, particularly mood disorders, schizophrenia, anxiety disorders and certain personality disorders
- Alcohol and other substance use disorders
- Hopelessness
- Impulsive and/or aggressive tendencies
- History of trauma or abuse
- Major physical illnesses
- Previous suicide attempt
- Family history of suicide
- Job or financial loss
- Loss of relationship
- Easy access to lethal means
- Local clusters of suicide
- Lack of social support and sense of isolation
- Stigma associated with asking for help
- Lack of health care, especially mental health and substance abuse treatment
- Cultural and religious beliefs, such as the belief that suicide is a noble resolution of a personal dilemma
- Exposure to others who have died by suicide (in real life or via the media and Internet)

Protective Factors for Suicide

- Effective clinical care for mental, physical and substance use disorders
- Easy access to a variety of clinical interventions
- Restricted access to highly lethal means of suicide
- Strong connections to family and community support
- Support through ongoing medical and mental health care relationships
- Skills in problem solving, conflict resolution and handling problems in a non-violent way
- Cultural and religious beliefs that discourage suicide and support self-preservation

The following signs may mean someone is at risk for suicide. The risk of suicide is greater if a behavior is new or has increased and if it seems related to a painful event, loss, or change. If you

or someone you know exhibits any of these signs, seek help as soon as possible by calling the Lifeline at **1-800-273-TALK** (8255).

- Talking about wanting to die or to kill themselves.
- Looking for a way to kill themselves, such as searching online or buying a gun
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live.
- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain.
- Talking about being a burden to others.
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs.
- Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly.
- Sleeping too little or too much.
- Withdrawing or isolating themselves.
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge.
- Displaying extreme mood swings.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline **Call us 1-800-273-TALK (8255)**

No matter what problems you are dealing with, we want to help you find a reason to keep living. By calling **1-800-273-TALK** (8255) you'll be connected to a skilled, trained counselor at a crisis center in your area, **anytime 24/7**.

If you feel you are in a crisis, whether or not you are thinking about killing yourself, please call the Lifeline. People have called us for help with substance abuse, economic worries, relationship and family problems, sexual orientation, illness, getting over abuse, depression, mental and physical illness, and even loneliness.

When you dial **1-800-273-TALK** (8255), you are calling the crisis center in the Lifeline network closest to your location. After you call, you will hear a message saying you have reached the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. You will hear hold music while your call is being routed. You will be helped by a skilled, trained crisis worker who will listen to your problems and will tell you about mental health services in your area. Your call is confidential and free.

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
<http://www.afsp.org>

When You Fear Someone May Take Their Life

Most suicidal individuals give some warning of their intentions. The most effective way to prevent a friend or loved one from taking his or her life is to recognize the factors that put people at risk for suicide, take warning signs seriously and know how to respond.

Know the Facts

PSYCHIATRIC DISORDERS

More than 90 percent of people who kill themselves are suffering from one or more psychiatric disorders, in particular:

- Major depression (especially when combined with alcohol and/or drug abuse)
- Bipolar depression
- Alcohol abuse and dependence
- Drug abuse and dependence
- Schizophrenia
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Eating disorders
- Personality disorders

Depression and the other mental disorders that may lead to suicide are -- in most cases -- both recognizable and treatable. Remember, depression can be lethal.

The core symptoms of major depression are a "down" or depressed mood most of the day or a loss of interest or pleasure in activities that were previously enjoyed for at least two weeks, as well as:

- Changes in sleeping patterns
- Change in appetite or weight
- Intense anxiety, agitation, restlessness or being slowed down
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Decreased concentration, indecisiveness or poorer memory
- Feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, self-reproach or excessive or inappropriate guilt
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide

PAST SUICIDE ATTEMPTS

Between 25 and 50 percent of people who kill themselves had previously attempted suicide. Those who have made suicide attempts are at higher risk for actually taking their own lives.

Availability of means

- In the presence of depression and other risk factors, ready access to guns and other weapons, medications or other methods of self-harm increases suicide risk.

Recognize the Imminent Dangers

The signs that most directly warn of suicide include:

- Threatening to hurt or kill oneself
- Looking for ways to kill oneself (weapons, pills or other means)
- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide
- Has made plans or preparations for a potentially serious attempt

Other warning signs include expressions or other indications of certain intense feelings in addition to depression, in particular:

- Insomnia
- Intense anxiety, usually exhibited as psychic pain or internal tension, as well as panic attacks
- Feeling desperate or trapped -- like there's no way out
- Feeling hopeless
- Feeling there's no reason or purpose to live
- Rage or anger

Certain behaviors can also serve as warning signs, particularly when they are not characteristic of the person's normal behavior. These include:

- Acting reckless or engaging in risky activities
- Engaging in violent or self-destructive behavior
- Increasing alcohol or drug use
- Withdrawing from friends or family

Take it Seriously

- Fifty to 75 percent of all suicides give some warning of their intentions to a friend or family member.
- Imminent signs must be taken seriously.

Be Willing to Listen

- Start by telling the person you are concerned and give him/her examples.
- If he/she is depressed, don't be afraid to ask whether he/she is considering suicide, or if he/she has a particular plan or method in mind.
- Ask if they have a therapist and are taking medication.
- Do not attempt to argue someone out of suicide. Rather, let the person know you care, that he/she is not alone, that suicidal feelings are temporary and that depression can be treated. Avoid the temptation to say, "You have so much to live for," or "Your suicide will hurt your family."

Seek Professional Help

- Be actively involved in encouraging the person to see a physician or mental health professional immediately.
- Individuals contemplating suicide often don't believe they can be helped, so you may have to do more.

- Help the person find a knowledgeable mental health professional or a reputable treatment facility, and take them to the treatment.

In an Acute Crisis

- If a friend or loved one is threatening, talking about or making plans for suicide, these are signs of an acute crisis.
- Do not leave the person alone.
- Remove from the vicinity any firearms, drugs or sharp objects that could be used for suicide.
- Take the person to an emergency room or walk-in clinic at a psychiatric hospital.
- If a psychiatric facility is unavailable, go to your nearest hospital or clinic.
- If the above options are unavailable, call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

Follow-up on Treatment

- Suicidal individuals are often hesitant to seek help and may need your continuing support to pursue treatment after an initial contact.
- If medication is prescribed, make sure your friend or loved one is taking it exactly as prescribed. Be aware of possible side effects and be sure to notify the physician if the person seems to be getting worse. Usually, alternative medications can be prescribed.
- Frequently the first medication doesn't work. It takes time and persistence to find the right medication(s) and therapist for the individual person.

HelpGuide.org

<http://www.helpguide.org>

Speak up if you're worried

If you spot the warning signs of suicide in someone you care about, you may wonder if it's a good idea to say anything. What if you're wrong? What if the person gets angry? In such situations, it's natural to feel uncomfortable or afraid. But anyone who talks about suicide or shows other warning signs needs immediate help—the sooner the better.

Talking to a person about suicide

Talking to a friend or family member about their suicidal thoughts and feelings can be extremely difficult for anyone. But if you're unsure whether someone is suicidal, the best way to find out is to ask. You can't make a person suicidal by showing that you care. In fact, giving a suicidal person the opportunity to express his or her feelings can provide relief from loneliness and pent-up negative feelings, and may prevent a suicide attempt.

Ways to start a conversation about suicide:

- I have been feeling concerned about you lately.
- Recently, I have noticed some differences in you and wondered how you are doing.
- I wanted to check in with you because you haven't seemed yourself lately.

Questions you can ask:

- When did you begin feeling like this?
- Did something happen that made you start feeling this way?
- How can I best support you right now?
- Have you thought about getting help?

What you can say that helps:

- You are not alone in this. I'm here for you.
- You may not believe it now, but the way you're feeling will change.
- I may not be able to understand exactly how you feel, but I care about you and want to help.
- When you want to give up, tell yourself you will hold off for just one more day, hour, minute — whatever you can manage.

When talking to a suicidal person

Do:

- Be yourself. Let the person know you care, that he/she is not alone. The right words are often unimportant. If you are concerned, your voice and manner will show it.
- Listen. Let the suicidal person unload despair, ventilate anger. No matter how negative the conversation seems, the fact that it exists is a positive sign.
- Be sympathetic, non-judgmental, patient, calm, accepting. Your friend or family member is doing the right thing by talking about his/her feelings.
- Offer hope. Reassure the person that help is available and that the suicidal feelings are temporary. Let the person know that his or her life is important to you.
- If the person says things like, "I'm so depressed, I can't go on," ask the question: "Are you having thoughts of suicide?" You are not putting ideas in their head, you are showing that you are concerned, that you take them seriously, and that it's OK for them to share their pain with you.

But don't:

- Argue with the suicidal person. Avoid saying things like: "You have so much to live for," "Your suicide will hurt your family," or "Look on the bright side."
- Act shocked, lecture on the value of life, or say that suicide is wrong.
- Promise confidentiality. Refuse to be sworn to secrecy. A life is at stake and you may need to speak to a mental health professional in order to keep the suicidal person safe. If you promise to keep your discussions secret, you may have to break your word.
- Offer ways to fix their problems, or give advice, or make them feel like they have to justify their suicidal feelings. It is not about how bad the problem is, but how badly it's hurting your friend or loved one.
- Blame yourself. You can't "fix" someone's depression. Your loved one's happiness, or lack thereof, is not your responsibility.

Adapted from: *Metanoia.org*

Respond quickly in a crisis

If a friend or family member tells you that he or she is thinking about death or suicide, it's important to evaluate the immediate danger the person is in. Those at the highest risk for committing suicide in the near future have a specific suicide PLAN, the MEANS to carry out the plan, a TIME SET for doing it, and an INTENTION to do it.

Suicide warning signs in teens

Additional warning signs that a teen may be considering suicide:

- Change in eating and sleeping habits
- Withdrawal from friends, family, and regular activities
- Violent or rebellious behavior, running away
- Drug and alcohol use
- Unusual neglect of personal appearance
- Persistent boredom, difficulty concentrating, or a decline in the quality of schoolwork
- Frequent complaints about physical symptoms, often related to emotions, such as stomachaches, headaches, fatigue, etc.
- Not tolerating praise or rewards

Source: *American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*

Important Resources for Youth Suicide Prevention

- National Center for the Prevention of Youth Suicide at <http://www.suicidology.org/ncpys>
- Warning Signs of Suicide at <http://www.suicidology.org/web/guest/stats-and-tools/warning-signs>
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center at <http://www.sprc.org>
- Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide at <http://www.sptsusa.org/>
- ReachOut at <http://us.reachout.com/>
- The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a free, 24-hour hotline available to anyone in suicidal crisis or distress. Call 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Learn more at <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>