Suicide Prevention: What You Need to Know

Suicide is a scary subject to talk about for many families. If you know what to look for, suicide is often preventable. In this handout, you will learn how to recognize when someone needs help if they are having suicidal thoughts. You will also learn the risk factors for suicide.

**Does Suicidal Thinking Mean a Person Will Act on Those Thoughts?**

Suicidal thinking is serious, but it does not always mean a person will take their own life. Suicidal thinking as a symptom of a deeper unresolved issue. Having an intent and a plan for suicide is much more serious than just thinking about it.

**What Are the Warning Signs That a Person Is Thinking About Suicide?**

- Talking about wanting to die or killing themselves
- Feeling hopeless, trapped, or having no reason to live
- Feeling like a burden to others
- Looking for ways to end their lives, such as searching online or buying weapons
- Withdrawing from loved ones or feeling isolated
- Increasing use of drugs or alcohol
- Displaying extreme mood swings
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Acting reckless, agitated, or anxious
- Feeling hopeless or in despair followed by sudden relief or improvement. This can be a sign that a person has made a suicide plan and feels relieved that they will no longer be in pain if they end their life.

**What Can I Do to Help?**

How you can help depends on whether a person has suicidal thoughts or an intent and a plan to commit suicide. The most important thing is to be supportive and willing to listen.

If your child has suicidal thoughts...

- Ask if anything is upsetting or bothering them. Talking about suicide does not make a person more likely to act. In fact, talking to the person can be seen as caring and a chance for relief.
- Ask if your child has ever thought about self-harm. If there is any reason to suspect that your child is at risk, ask more about what they are thinking, intending or planning. As a family member, this can be hard to hear or ask, but it is very important to do. Your child needs support, understanding and love during this difficult time.
- Talk with your partner, friends, or relatives who know your child.
- Check for support groups and resources in your community.
- If your child is being bullied online or in person, take their concerns seriously.
- Call your child’s pediatrician or care team if you are concerned or have questions.

If your child has a plan or intent for suicide...

- Call 911 or take your child to the closest emergency room.
- Make sure your child is somewhere safe where they cannot hurt themselves.
HOW COMMON IS SUICIDE?

Suicide is the second most common cause of death in people ages 10-34. In many cases, suicide is preventable if you know how to recognize the signs of suicide and get your child the help they need. About 1 in 4 teens and young adults think about suicide at least once in their lives.

WHAT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SUICIDE AND MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS?

About 9 out of 10 people who die by suicide have a mental health disorder, such as depression, substance use disorder, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In teens, suicidal acts are often impulsive. This means teens might harm themselves on purpose without fully thinking through the consequences of their actions. Breaking up with a significant other, not making a school play or a sports team or failing to achieve certain academic achievements have all been associated with dangerous acts of self-harm. Additionally, extremely stressful environments, such as poverty or traumatic circumstances, raise the risk of suicidal behavior. **In most cases, the absence of an intent or plan lowers the overall risk.**

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS FOR SUICIDE?

The risk factors that can make a person more likely to die by suicide are:

- A previous suicide attempt
- Mood disorders, such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder
- Substance use disorder
- Guns or other firearms kept in the house

Did you know...?

There is a common myth that asking your child about suicide will increase their risk for suicide. **There is no evidence to support this idea.** In fact, the opposite appears to be true. Children who are struggling feel relieved to be asked.

Watch a video on suicide prevention by The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds at MGHfC. Video courtesy of Vidscrip®.


Is it true that people are more likely to attempt suicide after instances of suicide appear in the media?

Yes. This is called **copycat phenomena**. Portrayals of suicide on TV, in movies, or online can raise a person’s risk of suicide for about 2 weeks following the event. Media are asked to follow strict guidelines about how to portray suicide or cover it in the news.