

Suicide Prevention:

UNDERSTANDING AND HELPING A SUICIDAL PERSON



A

suicidal person may not ask for help, but that doesn't mean that help isn't wanted. Most people who commit suicide don't want to die - they just want to stop hurting. Suicide prevention starts with recognizing the warning signs and taking them seriously. If you think a friend or family member is considering suicide, you might be afraid to bring up the subject. But talking openly about suicidal thoughts and feelings can save a life. Speak up if you're concerned and seek professional help immediately!

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- Risk factors for suicide
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If you are considering suicide, please see Helpguide's [Coping with Suicidal Thoughts and Feelings](#) or call **1-800-273-TALK** now!

Understanding suicide

The World Health Organization estimates that approximately 1 million people die each year from suicide. What drives so many individuals to take their own lives? To those not in the grips of suicidal despair, it is difficult to understand. However, a suicidal person is in so much pain that he or she can see no other option. Leading suicidologist Edwin Shneidman coined the word "psychache" to describe this overwhelming psychological anguish.

Suicide is a desperate attempt to escape suffering that has become unbearable. Blinded by feelings of self-loathing, hopelessness, and isolation, a suicidal person can't see any way of finding relief except through death. But despite their desire for the pain to stop, most suicidal people are deeply conflicted about ending their own lives. They wish there was an alternative to suicide, but they just can't see one.

Because of their ambivalence about death, suicidal individuals usually give warning signs or signals of their intentions. The best way to prevent suicide is to know and watch for these warning signs and to get involved if you spot them. If you believe that a friend or family member is suicidal, you can help by pointing out the alternatives, showing that you care, and getting a doctor or psychologist involved.

Through understanding, reassurance, and support, you can help your loved one overcome thoughts of suicide. The more informed you are, the better you'll be able to help. Look at the box below for the truth regarding false beliefs that people commonly have about suicide.

Common Misconceptions about Suicide

FALSE: *People who talk about suicide won't really do it.*

Almost everyone who commits or attempts suicide has given some clue or warning. Do not ignore suicide threats. Statements like "you'll be sorry when I'm dead," "I can't see any way out," — no matter how casually or jokingly said — may indicate serious suicidal feelings.

FALSE: *Anyone who tries to kill him/herself must be crazy.*

Most suicidal people are not psychotic or insane. They must be upset, grief-stricken, depressed or despairing, but

extreme distress and emotional pain are not necessarily signs of mental illness.

FALSE: *If a person is determined to kill him/herself, nothing is going to stop him/her.*

Even the most severely depressed person has mixed feelings about death, wavering until the very last moment between wanting to live and wanting to die. Most suicidal people do not want death; they want the pain to stop. The impulse to end it all, however overpowering, does not last forever.

FALSE: *People who commit suicide are people who were unwilling to seek help.*

Studies of suicide victims have shown that more than half had sought medical help within six months before their deaths.

FALSE: *Talking about suicide may give someone the idea.*

You don't give a suicidal person morbid ideas by talking about suicide. The opposite is true – bringing up the subject of suicide and discussing it openly is one of the most helpful things you can do.

Source: SAVE - Suicide Awareness Voices of Education

Risk factors for suicide

The vast majority of people who commit suicide suffer from depression, alcoholism, or another mental health problem such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Depression in particular plays a large role in suicide. The difficulty suicidal people have imagining a solution to their suffering is due in part to the distorted thinking caused by depression.

Suicide Risk Factors

- Mental illness
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Previous suicide attempts
- Family history of suicide
- Physical illness or chronic pain
- Cultural or religious beliefs glorifying suicide
- Loss or stressful life event
- Social isolation
- History of trauma or abuse
- Incarceration
- Recent release from psychiatric hospitalization
- Lack of access to mental health treatment

In addition to these general risk factors for suicide, there are several groups of people that are at a higher risk of suicide.

Suicide in the Elderly

Suicide in the Elderly

There is a tendency to think that teenagers are more likely to commit suicide than the elderly. However, the highest suicide rates of any age group occur among persons aged 65 years and older. One contributing factor is depression in the elderly that is undiagnosed and untreated.

Other risk factors for suicide in the elderly include:

- Recent death of a loved one
- Physical illness or pain
- Isolation and loneliness
- Loss of independence or sense of purpose

To learn more, see *Depression in Older Adults and the Elderly: Recognizing the Signs and Getting Help*.

Suicide in Teens

Teenage suicide is a serious and growing problem. The teenage years can be emotionally turbulent and stressful. Teenagers face pressures to succeed and fit in. They may struggle with self-esteem issues or self-doubt. For some, this leads to suicide. As in the elderly, depression is also a huge risk factor for teen suicide.

Other risk factors for teenage suicide include:

- Childhood abuse
- Recent traumatic event
- Availability of a gun
- Exposure to other teens who have committed suicide

To learn more, see *Teen Depression: A Guide for Parents and Teachers*.

Protective Factors

In addition to risk factors for suicide, there are protective factors that safeguard against depression and suicide. These protective factors include easy access to quality mental health care, connection to family and community, and skills in problem solving, conflict resolution, and impulse control. People who have a strong spiritual or religious faith, a sense of meaning and purpose in life, or a belief that suicide is wrong are also less likely to commit suicide.

Warning signs of suicide

There are many warning signs of suicidal feelings and intentions, and all should be taken very seriously. Major red flags for suicide include talking about killing or harming oneself, talking or writing a lot about death or dying, and seeking out lethal means, such as weapons and drugs. A more subtle but equally dangerous warning sign is that of hopelessness. Studies have found that hopelessness is a strong predictor of suicide. A person who feels hopeless may talk about "unbearable" feelings, predict a bleak future, and state that they have nothing to look forward to.

Suicide Warning Signs

Talking about suicide	Any talk about suicide, dying, or self-harm. Includes statements such as "I wish I hadn't been born," "If I see you again...", "I want out," and "I'd be better off dead."
Seeking access to lethal means	Looking for ways to commit suicide. Seeking out guns, pills, knives, or other objects that could be used in a suicide attempt.
Preoccupation with death	Unusual focus on death, dying, or violence. Writing poems or stories about death.
No hope for the future	Feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and being trapped ("There's no way out"). Belief that things will never get better or change.
Self-loathing, self-hatred	Feelings of worthlessness, guilt, shame, and self-hatred. Feeling like a burden ("Everyone would be better off without me").
Getting affairs in order	Making out a will. Giving away prized possessions. Making arrangements for family members.
Saying goodbye	Unusual or unexpected visits or calls to family and friends. Saying goodbye to people as if they won't be seen again.
Withdrawing from others	Withdrawing from friends and family. Increasing social isolation. Desire to be left alone.
Dangerous or self-destructive behavior	Increased alcohol or drug use, reckless driving, unsafe sex. Taking unnecessary risks as if they have a "death wish".
Sudden sense of calm	A sudden sense of calm and happiness after being extremely depressed can mean that the person has made a decision to commit suicide.

Other warning signs that point to a suicidal mind frame include dramatic mood swings or sudden personality changes, such as going from outgoing to withdrawn or well-behaved to rebellious. A suicidal person may also lose interest in day-to-day activities, neglect his or her appearance, and show big changes in eating or sleeping habits.

What to do if you're worried

If you spot the warning signs of suicide in someone you care about, it's common to feel overwhelmed and unsure of what to do. You may even wonder if it's a good idea to say something. What if you're wrong? What if the person gets angry? Even worse, what if you plant the idea? Alternately, if a friend or family member has already shared thoughts of suicide, you may be questioning how serious the person is.

In such situations, it's natural to be uncomfortable, worried, and afraid. However, anyone who talks about suicide or exhibits the warning signs needs immediate help. And 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 the individual the opportunity to express his or her feelings may prevent an attempt. The person may even be relieved that you brought up the issue.

Here are some questions you can ask:

- Have you ever thought that you'd be better off dead or that if you died, it wouldn't matter?
- Have you thought about harming yourself?
- Are you thinking about suicide?

Evaluating immediate suicide risk

If your loved one 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

Level of Suicide Risk

committing suicide in the near future have a specific suicide plan, the means to carry out the plan, a time schedule for doing it, and an intention to do it.

The following questions can help you assess the immediate risk for suicide:

- Do you have a suicide plan?
- Do you have what you need to carry out your plan (pills, gun, etc.)?
- Do you know when you would do it?
- Do you intend to commit suicide?

Mild – Some suicidal thoughts. No plan.

Moderate – Suicidal thoughts. Vague plan that is low on lethality. Claim they wouldn't do it.

High – Suicidal thoughts. Specific plan that is highly lethal. Claim they wouldn't do it.

Severe – Suicidal thoughts. Specific plan that is highly lethal. Claim they will do it.

If a suicide attempt seems imminent, call a local crisis center or dial 911. You can also take your friend or loved one to an emergency room. Do not, under any circumstances, leave the person alone. It's also wise to remove guns, drugs, knives, and other potentially lethal objects from the vicinity. In some cases, hospitalization may be necessary to keep the person safe.

If you or someone you care about is suicidal, please call:

Please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or the National Hopeline Network at 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433). These toll-free crisis hotlines offer 24-hour suicide prevention and support. Your call is free and confidential.

Helping a suicidal person

The best way to help and support a suicidal person is to offer an empathetic, listening ear. Let your loved one know that he or she is not alone and that you care.

- **Listen without judgment** – Let your loved one express his or her feelings and accept those feelings without judging or discounting them. Don't act shocked, lecture on the value of life, or say that suicide is wrong.
- **Offer hope** – Reassure the person that help is available and that their suicidal feelings are temporary. Don't dismiss the pain he or she feels, but talk to them about the alternatives to suicide and let them know that his or her life is important to you.
- **Don't 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 person safe. If you promise to keep your discussions secret, you may have to break your word.
- **Get professional help** – Call a crisis line yourself to get information and suggestions. Encourage the person to see a mental health professional, help them find a treatment facility, or take them to a doctor's appointment.
- **Make a plan for life** – Help the person develop a "plan for life," a set of steps he or she promises to follow in a crisis in order to stay safe. Print out this sample Plan for Life and help your loved one fill it out.
- **Take care of yourself** – Find someone that you trust—whether a friend, family member, clergyman, or counselor—to whom you can discuss your feelings and get support of your own. Don't take responsibility for making your loved one well. You can offer support, but you can't get better for him or her.

Antidepressants and suicide

Overall, the risk of suicide is lower in people taking antidepressants for depression. But for some, depression medication causes an increase—rather than a decrease—in depression and suicidal thoughts and feelings. Because of this risk, all antidepressant medications are required by the FDA to carry a "black box" warning.

Antidepressant Suicide Warning

The FDA advises that anyone on antidepressants should be watched for increases in suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Monitoring is especially important if this is the person's first time on depression medication or if the dose has recently been changed. The risk of suicide is the greatest during the first two months of antidepressant treatment.

New problems with anxiety, insomnia, aggressiveness, irritability, impulsivity, and restlessness—particularly if the symptoms are severe or appeared abruptly—are red flags. If you spot these symptoms or the depression appears to be getting worse, schedule an evaluation with a mental health professional immediately.

To Learn More...

If You Are Feeling Suicidal: Advice to Get You Through Understanding Depression: Spotting the Signs and Symptoms and Getting Help

Professional Help for Depression: Diagnosis and Treatment Options

Antidepressant Medications: Side Effects, Safety, and Treatment Guidelines

Helping a Depressed Person: Taking Care of Yourself while Supporting a Loved One

Recovering from Depression: Self-Help and Coping Tips

Related links for suicide prevention

General information about helping a suicidal person

Understanding Suicidal Thinking – Learn what to do when someone is suicidal and how to best provide support. (Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance)

Frequently Asked Questions About Suicide – Find answers to common questions about suicide, including who is at the highest risk and what suicide contagion is. (National Institute of Mental Health)

Understanding and Helping the Suicidal Person – Covers the warning signs of suicide and provides helpful tips on how to help a suicidal person. (The American Association of Suicidology)

Suicide and Mental Illness – Article on the link between suicide and mental illnesses such as depression, substance abuse, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder. (StopaSuicide.org)

Helping a suicidal person

What Can I Do To Help Someone Who Might be Suicidal? – Discusses ways to help, as well as possible warning signs. (Metanoia)

Suicide: Learn More, Learn to Help – A fact sheet that includes questions to ask to find out if someone is suicidal. (The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill).

When You Hear Someone May Take Their Own Life – Quick overview of what to do when someone is suicidal. (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention)

Handling a Call From a Suicidal Person – Advice on how to handle a phone call from a friend or family member who is suicidal. (Metanoia)

Suicide in teens and the elderly

Facts for Families: Teen Suicide – Learn about teen suicide, including risk factors, warning signs, and how to prevent it. (American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychiatry)

Suicide Prevention Resource Center: Teens – Guide to suicide in teenagers. includes advice for helping yourself or a friend. (Suicide Prevention Resource Center)

Older Adults: Depression and Suicide Facts – Overview of the problem of depression and suicide in the elderly, including how to get help. (National Institute of Mental Health)

Crisis help and support

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - Suicide prevention telephone hotline funded by the U.S. government. Provides free, 24-hour assistance. 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

National Hopeline Network - Toll-free telephone number offering 24-hour suicide crisis support. 1-800-SUICIDE (784-2433)

State Prevention Programs – Browse through a database of suicide prevention programs, organized by state. (National Strategy for Suicide Prevention)

Crisis Centers in Canada – Locate suicide crisis centers in Canada by province. (Centre For Suicide Prevention)

Befrienders Worldwide – International suicide prevention organization connects people to crisis hotlines in their country.

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