

Teen Suicide Prevention

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Suicide currently ranks as the 11th leading cause of death in the United States. For adolescents, suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15-to-24-year-olds exceeded only by injuries and homicides. Now that school is back in session, teens are exposed to a variety of stressful situations including but not limited to: their social status at school, academic stress from their course work and/or their parent's expectations, and regret over embarrassing behavior or unwanted sexual activity that occurred while they were using alcohol/substances at parties. Adolescents can often turn to thoughts of suicide as a way to make the intense (yet temporary) pain from these situations go away. Therefore it is important to know the steps you can take to protect your child from suicide and to be able to identify warning signs that your child may be contemplating suicide.

Adolescent suicides can be prevented by building a sense of family and school connectedness with the youth. Such steps can be achieved by actively listening, setting attainable goals, responding to concerns, and encouraging communication of emotions and feelings. Additional prevention factors include effective coping skills, positive peer groups, conflict resolution skills, high levels of self-esteem, academic achievement, and opportunities for participation in meaningful activities.

Research shows that 10% of youth who are successful in committing suicide had no prior history of suicide attempts and gave no indication of their suicidal thoughts prior to the act. However, 90% of youth who are suicidal do offer clues or exhibit warning signs that can be detected by others. When an adolescent shows warning signs, adults must act quickly. Far too often the clues given are dismissed by parents as being a "phase" or a "rough patch" that they will get through. Parents cannot afford to be passive if there are warning signs present. Parents should respect their gut feelings and investigate further by talking to their child's teachers or peers to see if they too have observed warning signs or too see if their child has spoken about suicide to them. It is important to know that 75% of adolescents will turn to their friends for help if they are contemplating suicide. Parents should also talk directly to their child about the warning signs they are observing. If their child admits to thinking about suicide or if the parent still is concerned about their child's denial of thinking about suicide, they should immediately get their child to a mental health professional specializing in adolescents for further assessment.

The warning signs to look for are as follows:

Behavioral warning signs

- Being depressed
- Showing changes in weight, appetite, or behavior
- Showing changes in school performance
- Having loss of energy
- Losing interest in once-pleasurable activities
- Giving away possessions
- Showing feelings of helplessness/hopelessness
- Abusing alcohol and other substances
- Withdrawing from others
- Alienating/isolating oneself
- Being preoccupied with death

Verbal warning signs

- "I am going to kill myself."
- "I want to die."
- "There is no reason for me to live anymore."
- "You all would be better off if I were dead."

- “I don’t want to be a burden anymore.”
- “I have had enough-I’m ending it all.”
- “I can’t stand living anymore.”
- “Don’t worry about me. I won’t be around much longer.”
- “I think suicide might be the answer.”

Environmental factors

- Previous suicide attempt
- Recent significant relationship breakup
- Death of a loved one
- Loss of job
- Academic problems
- Problems with the law
- Previous suicides in the family
- Recent disappointments
- Easy access to firearms
- Serious illness or belief that someone is seriously ill
- Exposure to suicidal friends or family members

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