

SUICIDE PREVENTION: WHAT TO WATCH FOR AND WHAT TO DO

- Over 34,000 people in the United States die by suicide every year.
- A person dies by suicide about every 15 minutes in the United States.
- There is an estimated 11 attempted suicides per every suicide death.

Suicide is a major, preventable public health problem. Yet it is important to note that suicide and suicidal behavior are not normal responses to stress. Suicidal behavior is complex. Some risk factors vary with age, gender, or ethnic group and may occur in combination or change over time. The warning signs that often precede suicide are recognizable, and suicides can be prevented through early recognition and treatment of depression and other psychiatric illnesses.



Awareness, education, and treatment are the keys to suicide prevention.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

Symptoms and Danger Signs

While some suicides occur without any outward warning, most people who are suicidal do give warnings. Persons who are considering suicide generally display symptoms of depression or other warning signs. Recognizing some of these is the first step in helping yourself or someone you care about.

Warning signs may include but are not limited to the following:

- Ideation (thinking, talking or wishing about suicide)
- Substance use or abuse (increased use or change in substance)
- Purposelessness (no sense of purpose or belonging)
- Anger
- Trapped (feeling like there is no way out)
- Hopelessness (there is nothing to live for, no hope or optimism)
- Withdrawal (from family, friends, work, school, activities, hobbies)
- Anxiety (restlessness, irritability, agitation)
- Recklessness (high risk-taking behavior)
- Mood disturbance (dramatic changes in mood)
- Talking about suicide
- Looking for ways to die (internet searches for how to commit suicide, looking for guns, pills, etc.)
- Statements about hopelessness, helplessness, or worthlessness
- Preoccupation with death
- Suddenly happier, calmer
- Loss of interest in things one cares about
- Visiting or calling people one cares about
- Making arrangements; setting one's affairs in order
- Giving things away, such as prized possessions

Most suicide attempts are expressions of extreme distress, not harmless bids for attention. A person who appears suicidal should not be left alone and needs immediate mental-health treatment.

Risk Factors for Suicide

Risk factors vary with age, gender, or ethnic group. They may occur in combination or change over time. Research shows that the risk for suicide is associated with changes in brain chemicals called neurotransmitters, including serotonin. Decreased levels of serotonin have been found in people with depression, impulsive disorders, and a history of suicide attempts, and in the brains of suicide victims.

Some important risk factors for suicide are listed below. **However, it is important to note that many people who have these risk factors, are not suicidal.**

- depression and other mental disorders, or a substance-abuse disorder (often in combination with other mental disorders); more than 90 percent of people who die by suicide have these risk factors
- prior suicide attempt
- family history of mental disorder or substance abuse
- family history of suicide
- family violence, including physical or sexual abuse
- firearms in the home, the method used in more than half of suicides
- incarceration
- exposure to the suicidal behavior of others, such as family members, peers, or media figures



Risk factors for attempted suicide by youth include depression, alcohol or other drug-use disorder, physical or sexual abuse, and disruptive behavior.

WHAT TO DO

Stigma associated with mental illnesses can prevent people from getting help. Your willingness to talk about depression and suicide with a friend, family member, or co-worker can be the first step in getting help and preventing suicide.

If You See the Warning Signs of Suicide...

Begin a dialogue by asking questions. Always take thoughts of or plans for suicide seriously. Your willingness to listen and to talk about suicidal thoughts in a non-judgmental, non-confrontational way can be the help a person needs to seek professional help. Questions okay to ask:

"Do you ever feel so badly that you think about suicide?"

"Do you have a plan to commit suicide or take your life?"

"Have you thought about when you would do it (today, tomorrow, next week)?"

"Have you thought about what method you would use?"

Asking these questions will help you to determine if your friend or family members is in immediate danger, and get help if needed.

Never keep a plan for suicide a secret. Don't worry about risking a friendship if you truly feel a life is in danger. It is better to lose a relationship from violating a confidence than it is to go to a funeral. And most of the time they will come back and thank you for saving their life.

Don't try to minimize problems or shame a person into changing their mind. Your opinion of a person's situation is irrelevant. Reassure them that help is available, that depression is treatable, and that suicidal feelings are temporary.



If you feel the person isn't in immediate danger, acknowledge the pain as legitimate and offer to work together to get help. This is one instance where you must be tenacious in your follow-up. Help find a doctor or a mental health professional, participate in making the first phone call, or go along to the first appointment.

Make sure you follow through.

Never leave a suicidal person alone. Remove dangerous items (firearms, drugs, or sharp objects) from the area. Take him/her to a Psychiatric Hospital, Clinic, or Emergency Room.

In an emergency, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK

Additional information on suicide prevention can be found at:

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) is part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), a component of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services via <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/suicide-prevention-listing.shtml>

The **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)**, a leading national not-for-profit organization dedicated to understanding and preventing suicide through research, education and advocacy, and to reaching out to people with mental disorders and those impacted by suicide via <http://www.afsp.org/>

The **American Association of Suicidology**, a group that serves as a national clearinghouse for information on suicide and promotes research, public awareness programs, public education and training for professionals and volunteers via <http://www.suicidology.org/web/guest/home>

The **Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE)**, a co-founding member of the National Council for Suicide Prevention and one of the nation's first organizations dedicated to suicide prevention via <http://www.save.org/>