

Suicide

Experts in the field suggest that a suicidal person is feeling so much pain that they can see no other option. They feel that they are a burden to others, and in desperation see death as a way to escape their overwhelming pain and anguish. The suicidal state of mind has been described as constricted, filled with a sense of self-hatred, rejection, and hopelessness.

If you are concerned that someone you know may be thinking of suicide, you can help. Remember, as a helper, *do not* promise to do anything you do not want to do or that you cannot do. First of all, if the person is actively suicidal, get help immediately. Call your local crisis service or the police, or take the person to the emergency room of your local hospital. Do not leave the person alone. If the person has attempted suicide and needs medical attention, call 9-1-1 or your local emergency services number.

If you are feeling suicidal, please contact your local crisis line or counseling centre. The information that follows is not a substitute for professional counseling. It is strongly recommended that you seek guidance from a professional caregiver.

Youth and Suicide

Adolescence is a time of dramatic change. The journey from child to adult can be complex and challenging. Young people often feel tremendous pressure to succeed at school, at home and in social groups. At the same time, they may lack the life experience that lets them know that difficult situations will not last forever. Mental health problems commonly associated with adults, such as depression, also affect young people. Any one of these factors, or a combination, may become such a source of pain that they seek relief in suicide. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people after motor vehicle accidents. Yet people are often reluctant to discuss it. This is partly due to the stigma, guilt or shame that surrounds suicide. People are often uncomfortable discussing it. Unfortunately, this tradition of silence perpetuates harmful myths and attitudes. It can also prevent people from talking openly about the pain they feel or the help they need.

Suicide can appear to be an impulsive act. But it's a complicated process, and a person may think about it for some time before taking action. It's estimated that 8 out of 10 people who attempt suicide or die by suicide hinted about or made some mention of their plans. Often, those warning signs are directed at a friend.

Recognizing the warning signs is one thing; knowing what to do with that information is another. Suicide was a taboo subject for a very long time. Even talking about it is still difficult for most people. But being able to talk about suicide can help save a life. Learning about suicide is the first step in the communication process. Suicide is about escape. Someone who thinks seriously about suicide is experiencing pain that is so crushing, they feel that only death will stop it.

Some myths about suicide

Myth: Young people rarely think about suicide.

Reality: Teens and suicide are more closely linked than adults might expect. In a survey of 15,000 grade 7 to 12 students in British Columbia, 34% knew of someone who had attempted or died by suicide; 16% had seriously considered suicide; 14% had made a suicide plan; 7% had made an attempt and 2% had required medical attention due to an attempt.

Myth: Talking about suicide will give a young person the idea, or permission, to consider suicide as a solution to their problems.

Reality: Talking calmly about suicide, without showing fear or making judgments, can bring relief to

someone who is feeling terribly isolated. A willingness to listen shows sincere concern; encouraging someone to speak about their suicidal feelings can reduce the risk of an attempt.

Myth: Suicide is sudden and unpredictable.

Reality: Suicide is most often a process, not an event. Eight out of ten people who die by suicide gave some, or even many, indications of their intentions.

Myth: Suicidal youth are only seeking attention or trying to manipulate others.

Reality: Efforts to manipulate or grab attention are always a cause for concern. It is difficult to determine if a youth is at risk of suicide. All suicide threats must be taken seriously.

Myth: Suicidal people are determined to die.

Reality: Suicidal youth are in pain. They don't necessarily want to die; they want their pain to end. If their ability to cope is stretched to the limit, or if problems occur together with a mental illness, it can seem that death is the only way to make the pain stop.

Myth: A suicidal person will always be at risk.

Reality: Most people feel suicidal at some time in their lives. The overwhelming desire to escape from pain can be relieved when the problem or pressure is relieved. Learning effective coping techniques to deal with stressful situations can help.

What are the signs

Most people who consider suicide are not determined to die. They are undecided about whether to live or die, so they may take risks and leave it to someone else to save them. Warning signs may be their way of asking for help or revealing the seriousness of their situation. Warning signs can be very subtle. They can also be as obvious as someone saying, "You won't be seeing me any more."

Here are some common warning signs:

- sudden change in behaviour (for better or worse)
- withdrawal from friends and activities,
- lack of interest
- increased use of alcohol and other drugs
- recent loss of a friend, family member or parent, especially if they died by suicide
- conflicting feelings or a sense of shame about being gay or straight
- mood swings, emotional outbursts, high level of irritability or aggression
- feelings of hopelessness
- preoccupation with death, giving away valued possessions
- talk of suicide: eg. "no one cares if I live or die"
- making a plan or increased risk taking
- writing or drawing about suicide (in a diary, for example)
- "hero worship" of people who have died by suicide

Remember, there is no ultimate list of warning signs. It may be right to be concerned about someone simply because their behaviour is out of character. Sudden shifts in a person's attitude or actions can alert friends to potential problems.

What can you do

The only person who can stop a person from considering suicide is the suicidal person. But you can help them to reconsider and seek other solutions. The most important thing is to listen. Take your friend seriously.

People who share their suicide plans often demand secrecy from their friends. But they're usually hoping that their friend will stop them by getting help. When a life is at risk, requests for confidentiality must be ignored.

Don't be afraid to be the first to mention suicide. Talking about suicide openly does not increase the risk. Ask if your friend is suicidal. Bringing the subject into the open can bring relief.

You can help by:

- really listening, without judging not challenging, or becoming angry and shocked
- finding ways to break through the silence and secrecy
- asking if they have plans or have made prior attempts
- helping them find ways to lessen their pain
- helping them see positive possibilities in their future
- guiding them to other sources of help as soon as possible, such as a counsellor or other trusted adult, or community crisis lines listed in your telephone book

No one can solve another person's problems. But sympathy and support can help; knowing that someone else has faced similar tough times and survived can help a suicidal person see a light at the end of a very dark tunnel.

Preventing Suicide

Suicide. We would rather not talk about it. We hope it will never happen to anyone we know. But suicide is a reality, and it is more common than you might think. The possibility that suicide could claim the life of someone you love cannot be ignored. By paying attention to warning signs and talking about the "unthinkable," you may be able to prevent a death.

Who is at risk?

People likely to commit suicide include those who:

- are having a serious physical or mental illness,
- are abusing alcohol or drugs,
- are experiencing a major loss, such as the death of a loved one, unemployment or divorce,
- are experiencing major changes in their life, such as teenagers and seniors,
- have made previous suicide threats.

Why do people commit suicide?

There are many circumstances which can contribute to someone's decision to end his/her life, but a person's feelings about those circumstances are more important than the circumstances themselves. All people who consider suicide feel that life is unbearable. They have an extreme sense of hopelessness, helplessness, and desperation. With some types of mental illness, people may hear voices or have delusions which prompt them to kill themselves.

People who talk about committing suicide or make an attempt do not necessarily want to die. Often, they are reaching out for help. Sometimes, a suicide attempt becomes the turning point in a person's life if there is enough support to help him/her make necessary changes.

If someone you know is feeling desperate enough to commit suicide, you may be able to help him/her find a better way to cope. If you yourself are so distressed that you cannot think of any way out except by "ending it all," remember, help for your problems is available.

What are the danger signs?

Some warning signs that a person may be suicidal include:

- repeated expressions of hopelessness, helplessness, or desperation,
- behaviour that is out of character, such as recklessness in someone who is normally careful,
- signs of depression - sleeplessness, social withdrawal, loss of appetite, loss of interest in usual activities,
- a sudden and unexpected change to a cheerful attitude,
- giving away prized possessions to friends and family,
- making a will, taking out insurance, or other preparations for death, such as telling final wishes to someone close,
- making remarks related to death and dying, or an expressed intent to commit suicide. An expressed intent to commit suicide should always be taken very seriously.

Prevent a suicide attempt

If you are concerned that someone may be suicidal, take action. If possible, talk with the person directly. The single-most important thing you can do is listen attentively without judgement.

Talking about suicide can only decrease the likelihood that someone will act on suicidal feelings. There is almost no risk that raising the topic with someone who is not considering suicide will prompt him/her to do it.

Find a safe place to talk with the person, and allow as much time as necessary. Assure him/her of your concern and your respect for his/her privacy. Ask the person about recent events, and encourage him/her to express his/her feelings freely. Do not minimize the feelings involved.

Ask whether the person feels desperate enough to consider suicide. If the answer is yes, ask, "Do you have a plan? How and where do you intend to kill yourself?"

Admit your own concern and fear if the person tells you that he/she is thinking about suicide but do not react by saying, "You shouldn't be having these thoughts; things can't be that bad." Remember, you are being trusted with someone's deepest feelings. Although it may upset you, talking about those feelings will bring the person relief.

Ask if there is anything you can do. Talk about resources that can be drawn on (family, friends, community agencies, crisis centers) to provide support, practical assistance, counseling or treatment.

Make a plan with the person for the next few hours or days. Make contacts with him/her or on his/her behalf. If possible, go with the person to get help.

Let the person know when you can be available, and then make sure you are available at those times. Also, make sure your limits are known, and try to arrange that there is always someone that he/she can call at any time of day.

Ask who else knows about the suicidal feelings. Are there other people who should know? Is the person willing to tell them? Unfortunately, not everyone will treat this issue sensitively. Confidentiality is important, but do not keep the situation secret if a life is clearly in danger.

Stay in touch to see how he/she is doing. Praise the person for having the courage to trust you and for continuing to live and struggle.

What to do following a suicide attempt

A person may try to commit suicide without warning or despite efforts to help. If you are involved in giving first aid, make every effort to be calm and reassuring, and get medical help immediately.

The time following an attempt is critical. The person should receive intensive care during this time. Maintain regular contact, and work with the person to organize support. It is vital that he/she does not feel cut off or shunned as a result of attempting suicide.

Be aware that, if someone is intent on dying, you may not be able to stop it from happening. You cannot and should not carry the responsibility for someone else's choice.

What can you do if you are feeling suicidal?

The beginning of the way out is to let someone else in. This is very hard to do because, if you feel so desperate that suicide seems to be the only solution, you are likely very frightened and ashamed. There is no reason to be ashamed of feeling suicidal and no reason to feel ashamed for seeking help. You are not alone; many people have felt suicidal when facing difficult times and have survived, usually returning to quite normal lives.

Take the risk of telling your feelings to someone you know and trust: a relative, friend, social service worker, or a member of the clergy for your religion. There are many ways to cope and get support. The sense of desperation and the wish to die will not go away at once, but it will pass. Regaining your will to live is more important than anything else at the moment.

Some things that you can do are:

- call a crisis telephone support line,
- draw on the support of family and friends,
- talk to your family doctor; he/she can refer you to services in the community, including counseling and hospital services,
- set up frequent appointments with a mental health professional, and request telephone support between appointments, · get involved in self-help groups,
- talk every day to at least one person you trust about how you are feeling,
- think about seeking help from the emergency department of a local hospital,
- talk to someone who has "been there" about what it was like and how he/she coped,
- avoid making major decisions which you may later regret.

Do you need more help?

If you or someone you know is feeling suicidal and you need more information about resources in your area, contact a community organization, such as the Mental Health Association, which can help you find additional support.

Grief after Suicide

Coming to terms with the death of a loved one is one of life's most challenging journeys. When the death is from suicide, family members and friends can experience an even more complex kind of grief. While trying to cope with the pain of their sudden loss, they are overwhelmed by feelings of blame, anger and incomprehension. Adding to their burden is the stigma that still surrounds suicide.

Survivors of suicide and their friends can help each other and themselves by gaining an understanding of grief after suicide. For survivors, it helps to know that the intensity of their feelings is normal. Friends can learn how to support the bereaved.

A Different Grief

Survivors of suicide – the family and friends of a person who completes suicide – feel the emotions that death always brings. Adding to their suffering is the shock of a sudden, often unexpected death. As well, they may feel isolated and judged by society, friends and colleagues.

Some people compare the emotional stress to being trapped on an endless roller-coaster. Survivors may feel:

- guilt, anger, blame, shame, confusion, relief, despair, betrayal, abandonment
- disconnected from their loved one because he or she chose to die
- consumed by a need to find the meaning and reasons for the suicide
- an exaggerated sense of responsibility for the death
- the suicide was malicious, or a way for the deceased to get back at them.

Stigma Affects Mourning

Suicide is a difficult topic for many people. Cultural and religious taboos can lead to judgmental or condemning attitudes. Some people prefer to avoid even discussing suicide and their lack of knowledge about it makes them fearful. Attitudes like these can isolate and further stress survivors.

Stigma leads survivors to feel abandoned by their social network. They describe:

- Being avoided by friends or acquaintances
- Feeling judged
- People behaving as if the death had not occurred

Some survivors perceive stigma that is not really there. They may anticipate difficult questions and disapproval, and withdraw in order to protect themselves.

Whether it is real or perceived, stigma can affect a survivor's journey to acceptance.

What Survivors Should Know

First, know that you are not alone. Approximately 1 out of 4 people know someone who died by suicide. It can also help to know that:

- Suicide was the decision of the person who died
- It is estimated that the majority of suicides are the result of untreated depression or other mental illness

Survivors Are at Risk

Survivors of suicide are at high risk of completing suicide themselves. The experience suddenly makes the idea of suicide very real, and it is not uncommon for survivors to experience suicidal thoughts. Another factor is that suicide-related illnesses like depression run in families.

Because of this increased risk for suicide, survivors should not be isolated, but rather supported and encouraged to talk about all their feelings – even the most difficult ones.

Survivor Coping Strategies

No two people ever experience grief in the same way, or with the same intensity, but there are strategies that can help you cope with your loss.

- Acknowledge that the death is a suicide
- Recognize your feelings and loss
- Talk openly with your family so that everyone's grief is acknowledged and can be expressed
- Reach out to your friends and guide them if they don't know what to say or do
- Find support groups where you can share your stories, memories and methods of coping
- Be aware that anniversaries (e.g. birthdays) can be especially difficult and consider whether to continue old traditions or begin new ones
- Develop rituals to honor your loved one's life

How Can I Help My Friend?

Showing a willingness to listen is probably the most important thing you can do for a friend who is a survivor of suicide. It may be distressing at first, but you're not expected to provide answers. Instead, you can be a comforting, safe place for someone who desperately needs to talk.

What you can do:

- Listen with non-judgmental compassion
- Understand that your friend will need time to deal with their loss
- Avoid clichés
- Talk about the person who has died
- Offer practical assistance such as shopping, cooking, driving
- Find and offer information on resources, support groups, etc.
- Be aware of difficult times, like anniversaries and holidays

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