

Suicide Prevention: Risk Factors and How to Help Someone in Crisis

By SPAN-California

The thought that someone we love would commit suicide is frightening to contemplate. Most people ignore the subject or think it couldn't happen to them. But it can. In California, suicide is a leading cause of death, particularly among teens and the elderly.

Choosing to become informed can arm us with the knowledge to help prevent suicide. The following describes risk factors, protective factors, symptoms of depression and the warning signs that 75% of suicidal persons display. You'll also learn what you can do to help someone in crisis and where to seek additional assistance.

■ Suicide Risk Factors

- Mental disorders, particularly depression and other mood disorders, schizophrenia, anxiety disorders and certain personality disorders
- Alcohol and other substance abuse
- Hopelessness
- Impulsive or aggressive tendencies
- History of trauma or abuse
- Certain major physical illnesses
- Previous suicide attempt
- Suicide death of family member or loved one
- Job or financial loss
- Divorce or death of spouse
- Relationship or social loss
- Easy access to lethal means
- Legal or IRS problems
- Academic or social failure in school
- Lack of social support, a sense of isolation
- Stigma associated with seeking help
- Barriers to accessing health care, especially mental health and substance abuse treatment
- Certain cultural and religious beliefs
- Exposure to someone who has died by suicide and the associated negative influence, including through the media

■ Protective Factors

- Effective clinical care for mental, physical and substance use disorders
- Easy access to a variety of clinical interventions
- Restricted access to highly lethal means of suicide
- Strong connection to family and support from the community
- Support through ongoing medical and mental health care relationships
- Skills in problem solving, conflict resolution and non-violent handling of disputes
- Cultural and religious beliefs that discourage suicide and support self-preservation

■ Where to Seek Help in a Crisis

- Call local suicide prevention crisis line or 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- Call or go to a therapist or family doctor
- Call 911 if suicide is imminent
- Call subject's family, friends or both
- Go to local emergency room
- Go to local psychiatric hospital
- Go to local mental health clinic
- Call local county mental health service

- Call school counselors, teachers, clergy or law enforcement

▣ What You Can Do

- Take all threats, gestures and previous attempts seriously. Make sure your loved one's professional caregiver does as well
- Express your concern. Be a non-judgmental listener
- Ask what the matter is. Get the person in crisis to talk about the problem(s)
- Don't try to talk them out of suicide. This indicates you're not listening
- Let them know you care. Have a sense of what they are feeling and assure them they are not alone
- Don't be afraid to talk about suicide directly, or ask if they have a plan
- Help them understand their problems are temporary and can be solved
- If they were in crisis before, ask how they resolved it. Can they apply the same solution now? Discuss alternative solutions
- Never agree to keep suicidal thoughts or plans a secret
- If professional care is required, help them find it. It may be necessary to accompany them
- If the crisis is acute, do not leave them alone until help is available. Remove firearms, knives, razors, medications and other potentially dangerous items from the area
- After assistance is obtained, follow up with the person's treatment and progress.
- Take an active role to ensure treatment compliance

▣ Symptoms of Depression

- Feeling sad or anxious, or being in an empty mood that does not go away.
- Feeling guilty, worthless or hopeless
- Having trouble concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Feeling very tired or lacking energy
- Having trouble sleeping, staying asleep or sleeping too much
- Having little interest in eating or eating all the time
- Feeling irritable or restless
- Having aches and pains that don't go away regardless of what you do.
- Having little interest or find little pleasure in activities you once enjoyed, including sex
- Having thoughts of death or suicide

▣ Warning Signs of Suicide

- Previous suicide threats, gestures or attempts
- Symptoms of depression
- Loss of interest or pleasure in formerly enjoyed activities
- Feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness
- Sudden changes in mood or behavior
- Changes in eating habits
- Changes in sleeping habits
- Loss of energy
- Lack of concentration, indecision
- Giving away favorite possessions
- Thoughts or speaking about death or suicide
- Use of alcohol or drugs to blunt psychological pain

SPAN-California is a non-profit, 501(c)(3) organization of concerned citizens and professionals dedicated to the prevention of suicide through statewide and community partnerships.

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