

When a young person commits suicide, everyone is affected. Family members, friends, teammates, and neighbors might experience feelings of grief, confusion, and guilt. They may feel that if only they had done something differently, this might have been prevented. The reasons behind a teen suicide are complex and sometimes hard to understand.

It's important to understand some of these issues so we can help see if a teen might need help.

Suicide Statistics

Suicide in young children is rare, and increases as children reach their teens. It is the third leading cause of death for 15-24 year olds.

Boys die from suicide attempts about four times as often as girls, while girls are think about suicide twice as often as boys. Boys use guns, hang themselves, or jump from heights more often than girls. Girls are more likely attempt suicide by poisoning, drug overdoses, or cutting themselves.

Which Kids Are More at Risk for Suicide

Teens are under a lot of pressure to perform well in sports or school and try to fit in with others. They also are changing from children to adults, becoming more sexually aware, and trying to fit into the rules of society, their peers, and their families.

Teens do well when there is a good network of friends, family, religious ties, and other activities such as music, clubs, or sports. Often they don't see they have these connections and feel isolated and disconnected.

Here are some other factors which can increase the risk of suicide:

- having a mental illness, especially depression, bi-polar disorder, and schizophrenia
- use of drugs and alcohol
- feelings of distress, irritability, or agitation
- feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness
- previous suicide attempt
- other suicides by family, peers, or celebrities
- being a victim of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse
- a history of trauma
- lack of support from peers and family
- dealing with homosexuality and hostility from others about sexual orientation

Warning Signs

Many times a teen suicide will follow a break up with a boyfriend or girlfriend, failure (or perceived failure) death, divorce, or a major family conflict (especially domestic violence).

Often teens are thinking about suicide may:

- talk about death or suicide
- talk about “going away”
- talk about hopelessness
- pull away from family and friends
- lose desire in things enjoyed in the past
- not be thinking clearly
- have changes in sleeping or eating
- self-destructive behaviors (drugs, drinking, reckless driving, cutting or burning)

What Can Loved Ones Do?

Many teens who commit suicide gave some warning signs ahead of time. It's important to be aware of these. Most suicide attempts are expressions of extreme distress, not harmless bids for attention. A person who appears suicidal should not be left alone

Watch and Listen

Keep a close eye on kids who are depressed and isolating. Grades dropping at school, for example, may be a sign of “withdrawing” from school.

Keep open lines of communication and concern to show support and love. If your teen confides in you, take it seriously. What may not seem like a big deal to an adult can be serious for a child (such as a fight with a friend, or a snub in the lunchroom). Listen to the your teen in a non-judgmental manner and your support and concern.

Promote emotional support

If your teen doesn't feel comfortable speaking w/ you, suggest having a “neutral party” such as a clergy member, coach, family friend, another relative, a school counselor, or the child's doctor.

Ask Questions

It can be very hard to talk about this with your child. Some fear that if the question is brought up it will “put ideas” in the child’s head. It can be helpful to let someone know why you are asking. “I’ve noticed you’ve been talking about wishing you were dead. Are you thinking about trying to kill yourself?”

Get Help

If you think your child is in immediate danger, or has done something which can cause harm or death, call 911 immediately.

If you think your child is thinking about suicide, get help immediately. Your doctor can refer you to a psychiatrist or mental health therapist (licensed social worker, licensed mental health counselor), or psychologist. Local hospitals can give resources as well. There is a list of resources at the end of this article.

Cognitive behavioral therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, and/or the use of medications have been shown to be very effective treatments. Often, teens won’t tell mental health professionals they have thoughts of suicide.

Mental health professional evaluate for the presence, severity, and duration of suicidal thoughts and will ask about mental health history, history of trauma, evaluate “plan” for suicide, use different rating scales, and “Contract for Safety”. The Contract has not been shown to significantly reduce suicidal danger, but if someone refuses to contract for safety, that’s a good indication of severity.

If you have a scheduled appointment with a mental health professional, keep the appointment, even if your child says s/he’s feeling better. Suicidal thoughts tend to come and go, and the therapist can teach ways to help your child with these feelings.

If your teen refuses to attend the appointment, discuss this with the professional. You may want to attend the session as well.

Be sure to let the mental health professional know any family history of depression, substance abuse, domestic violence, or other stressors going on in your home.

Places to get information and help

These are some places you can go locally for help:

- IF THIS IS A LIFE THREATENING EMERGENCY, CALL 911 (and take away access to any means for harm (pills, guns, weapons, dangerous areas, and don’t leave person alone).
- Lee Mental Health Center 275-3222

- Lee Mental Health Center Emergency Services 275-4242
- United Way 433-3900
- 211
- Lifeline (800) 273-8255
- Family doctors
- Mental health specialists (psychiatrists, social workers, mental health counselors, psychologists)
- Health maintenance organizations (HMO's)
- Community mental health centers
- Hospital and university psychiatric departments
- Social service agencies
- Employee assistance programs
- Local medical and psychiatric societies

Places to Go on Line for Help

National Institute of Health

National Institute for Mental Health

American Psychiatric Association

American Psychological Association

Journal of the American Osteopathic Association

Journal of the American Medical Association "Patient Page"