

## **Suicide Prevention Information for Parents**

Teenagers experience strong feelings of stress, confusion, self-doubt, pressure to succeed, financial uncertainty, and other fears while growing up. For some teenagers, divorce, the formation of a new family with step-parents and step-siblings, or moving to a new community can be very unsettling and can intensify self-doubts. For some teens, suicide may appear to be a solution to their problems and stress.

***Depression and suicidal feelings are treatable mental disorders.*** The child or adolescent needs to have his or her illness recognized and diagnosed, and appropriate treatment plans developed. When parents are in doubt whether their child has a serious problem, a psychiatric examination can be very helpful.

Although youth suicide rates have declined slightly since 1992, it is still the third leading cause of death among 10–24 year olds, following automobile accidents and homicide. Alarming, the suicide rates for 10–14 year olds increased 196% between 1983–98. Equally concerning, suicide rates among certain subpopulations, such as Black males, White females, Asian youth, American Indian youth, and sexual minority youth have all increased. Recent data suggest that in 2003, Hispanic students had the highest rates of suicidal ideation and behavior and were more likely than other minority students to attempt suicide.

Suicidal adolescents feel deep emotional pain and isolation. Feelings of hopelessness, sadness, worthlessness, anger, and loneliness are often compounded by the belief that no one else can understand—or help—their pain. Although some youth self-refer, most either attempt to keep their decision a secret (but usually give warning signs anyway) or cry for help indirectly by making reference to their plans, usually to peers. Adolescent girls have higher rates of depression and are twice as likely to carefully plan and attempt suicide. Boys, however, are more likely to act impulsively and almost five times as likely as females to die by suicide.

Adolescents can understand the concept of death cognitively. However, it is not clear that they internalize the end of their own lives, particularly younger adolescents. It would not be uncommon for students even as old as 16 to view death as magical, temporary, and reversible. Typically, a combination of factors compels a youth to attempt suicide. This includes both individual (e.g., depression or substance abuse) and environmental (e.g., the presence of a firearm or poverty) risk factors as well as a lack of protective factors (e.g., family cohesion and connections to caring adults). Often, situational events (e.g., the death of a loved one or a romantic breakup) can trigger a suicide attempt.

Many of the signs and symptoms of suicidal feelings are similar to those of depression. Parents should be aware of the following suicidal warning signs and triggers:

### **Warning signs**

- Change in eating and sleeping habits
- Withdrawal from friends, family, and regular activities
- Violent actions, rebellious behavior, or running away
- Drug and alcohol use
- Unusual neglect of personal appearance

- Dramatic changes in behavior or personality
- Persistent boredom, difficulty concentration, or a decline in the quality of schoolwork
- Frequent complaints about physical symptoms, often related to emotions, such as stomachaches, headaches, fatigue, etc.
- Loss of interest in pleasurable activities
- Fascination with death and dying
- Complain of feeling rotten inside
- Give verbal hints with statements such as: I won't be a problem for you much longer, Nothing matters, It's no use, and I won't see you again.
- Put his or her affairs in order, for example, give away favorite possessions, clean his or her room, throw away important belongings, etc.
- Become suddenly cheerful after a period of depression
- Have signs of psychosis (hallucinations or bizarre thoughts)

### **Triggers**

- Getting into trouble with authorities
- Breakup with a boyfriend or a girlfriend
- Death of a loved one or significant person/loss
- Knowing someone who died by suicide
- Bullying or victimization
- Family conflict/dysfunction
- Academic crisis or school failure
- Disappointment or rejection
- Abuse
- Trauma exposure
- Serious illness or injury
- Anniversary of the death of a loved one
- Forced or extended separation from friends or family.

If a child or adolescent says, I want to kill myself, or I'm going to commit suicide, always take the statement seriously and immediately seek assistance from a qualified mental health care professional. People often feel uncomfortable talking about death. However, asking the child or adolescent whether he or she is depressed or thinking about suicide can be helpful. Rather than putting thoughts in the child's head, such a question will provide assurance that somebody cares and will give the young person the chance to talk about problems.

If one or more of these things occurs, parents need to talk to their child about their concerns and seek professional help. With support from family and appropriate treatment, children and teenagers who are suicidal can heal and return to a healthier path of development.

### **Resources**

American Association of Suicidology [www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)  
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention [www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)  
Signs of Suicide (SOS) [www.mentalhealthscreening.org](http://www.mentalhealthscreening.org)  
Teen Screen Program [www.teenscreen.org](http://www.teenscreen.org)  
Centers for Disease Control [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)  
National Suicide Hotline: 800.SUICIDE

*Sources: "Facts for Families: Suicide" by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and "Suicide Prevention and Intervention" by Richard Lieberman, Scott Poland, and Katherine Cowan for the National Association of School Psychologists.*