



## When a Young Person is Suicidal

Navigating the teen years safely and healthily can be a real challenge. It's an emotional journey, this intense exploration of values, of sexuality, of career hopes and independence. At the same time, there are more responsibilities on all sides: school, family, work and relationships. The burden of trying to balance personal discoveries and dreams against other people's expectations can be enormous. For some, the pressure can become painful and overwhelming.

The stress of being young is often not understood or even recognized, and that can make a person feel alone and isolated. Because problems are being confronted for the first time, they can appear huge and impossible to solve. These feelings can make a friend very vulnerable to thoughts of suicide. 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 NOT DEATH**

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.

Most people consider suicide at some time in their life. There is nothing wrong with having these thoughts, or with acknowledging them. It is when these thoughts begin to take shape as plans that there is cause for alarm. Like adults, young people become depressed. But because they don't behave the way depressed adults do, they may be dismissed as simply "acting out". Or being rebellious. Emotional problems or conflicts about sexual orientation can also go unnoticed.

Being depressed, while struggling with the challenges and pressures of being young, can create suicidal feelings.

## 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 YOU CAN 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.

## WHERE TO GO FOR MORE INFORMATION

Check with your local library for books that can help you understand suicide. Helpful resources on the Internet include:

### **THE CANADIAN HEALTH NETWORK:**

[www.canadian-health-network.ca](http://www.canadian-health-network.ca)

### **The Canadian Mental Health Association:**

[www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)

### **Suicide Information and Education Centre:**

[www.siec.ca/crisis.html](http://www.siec.ca/crisis.html)

Your local branch of the **Canadian Mental Health Association** can provide you with information on emergency response, suicide prevention and other professional services in your community.

## THE CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

is a national voluntary association that exists to promote the mental health of all people. **CMHA** believes that information about mental health issues and services should be available to everyone so that they can get help when they need it.

This pamphlet provides general information and is not intended as a substitute for professional advice.



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