

Youth at Risk

INFORMATION FOR YOUTH

Table of Contents

Are you feeling suicidal?	1
Stigma	2
What is stigma?.....	2
What can you do?	3
Warning Signs and Risk Factors	3
Warning signs.....	4
Risk factors.....	4
Protective Factors	5
External factors.....	5
Internal factors.....	6
Myths about Suicide	6
Asking the Question	7
Are you thinking about Suicide?	7
Confidentiality	8
Getting help for yourself or others	9
Finding Help for Yourself.....	10
Helping a Friend or Peer	10
Resources	11
Resources on the Web	11
Books for Further Reading	11

Are you feeling suicidal?

If someone you know is feeling suicidal

Do not leave a suicidal person alone. Contact a crisis centre or take the person to a hospital emergency room. Involve others. Do not try to handle the crisis alone.



Thank you for getting in touch. You may not be aware the Centre for Suicide Prevention is a library and resource centre and does NOT do crisis intervention or counselling. The information here is not a substitute for professional counselling. We strongly advise you to seek help from a professional caregiver if required.

GET HELP RIGHT AWAY

If a person is actively suicidal (they have a plan and the means to carry it out), get help immediately. Call a crisis service, the police, or take the person to the emergency room of a hospital.

If you are feeling suicidal

If you are feeling suicidal, tell someone how you are feeling and ask for help. Call a crisis centre or talk to an adult, such as a parent, teacher or school counsellor.

Thank you for getting in touch. You may not be aware the Centre for Suicide Prevention is a library and resource centre and does NOT do crisis intervention or counselling. The information here is not a substitute for professional counselling. We strongly advise you to seek help from a professional caregiver if required.

Get help right away

If you are feeling suicidal, tell someone right away. Contact a crisis line or talk to an adult, such as a parent, teacher or school counsellor. It may not seem like it now, but things can and do change. Asking for help opens the door to change. Phone numbers for the crisis centre and counsellors are in your phone directory.

We are not a counselling service and must refer you to others who can help you.

You have taken an important step by looking for help. We hope you will contact someone right away.
Calgary Distress Centre: (403) 266-4357
Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868

Stigma

For many young people the thought of being different from their friends or social group can be frightening. The importance of fitting in is one of the main reasons a person does not seek help for problems. This is particularly true for issues concerning mental and emotional health which can carry a burden of stigma and shame.

What is stigma?

Stigma is a negative stereotype you may hold about someone, something or even yourself. We discriminate against and label those we see as having characteristics that are undesirable. In doing this we establish a sense of separation between “us” and “them.” Ultimately stigma is about disrespect.

What effect does this have on the person(s) being stigmatized?

When we hold negative attitudes toward someone it frequently results in the person feeling dismissed, marginalized and less than human. Poor self esteem can follow, as well as a loss of hope and even thoughts of suicide. Because of stigma and a fear of being rejected the person may not actively seek help when they need it.

What can you do?

First examine your own attitude

Ask yourself - Do I stereotype people who are different? Do I treat them with disrespect? We all have the capacity to discriminate against others. Even children as young as three can recognize when someone is different. By stigmatizing we can feel a sense of separation and relief that "I am normal". The good news is this can change...

Where did my attitude come from?

Many of the images and views we hold about people who have mental illness or who may be suicidal have a long history. These beliefs are reinforced by the media who often portray people with mental illness as unpredictable and aggressive or dangerous and violent.

How can I change things?

Get informed! The best way to counteract the stigma of mental illness and suicidal behaviour is to get the facts. Mental illness can develop after a traumatic event or it may be linked to the genetic makeup of a person.

Be compassionate and understanding. When you encounter a friend, classmate, teammate or even a stranger who may have different ways of doing things or a different way of being, treat them how you would want to be treated. We all have times when we feel down, angry, overwhelmed, or unable to cope.

Remember normal is a state that really doesn't exist. We are all human – interesting, flawed, talented..... different. The thing to remember is when different means mentally unwell, help is available. Support from family, friends, teammates, school teachers and strangers is crucial.

For more information go to:

<http://www.mentalhealthworks.ca/facts/sheets/stigma.asp>

<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/OEL99-0004/default.asp>

Warning Signs and Risk Factors

Do you suspect a friend, brother, maybe a sister of being at risk of suicide but you are not really sure? Most people who are considering suicide do give signs of their distress, although not all show warning

signs. Some people may be at a higher risk of suicide just because of certain factors in their lives. Knowing what to look for can help you find help.

Warning signs

Most people who are considering suicide do show signs of their distress, although some may not. Those who exhibit changes such as these may be at risk for harming themselves:

- Talking about suicide or a plan for suicide.
- Saying things like, "I'm going to kill myself," "I wish I were dead," "I shouldn't have been born," "I won't be a problem for you much longer," "Nothing matters," or "It's no use."
- Making statements about hopelessness, helplessness or worthlessness.
- Complaining of being a bad person or feeling "rotten inside," refusing help or feeling beyond help. Not tolerating praise or rewards.
- Giving away favourite possessions or making a will.
- Being preoccupied with death.
- Showing a loss of interest in pleasurable activities or things they once cared about. Always feeling bored.
- Showing marked personality changes and serious mood changes. Withdrawing from friends and family.
- Having trouble concentrating or difficulties with school work.
- Complaining frequently about physical symptoms often related to emotions, such as stomach aches, headaches or fatigue. Changes in eating and sleeping habits.
- Showing impulsive behaviours, such as violent actions, rebellious behaviour or running away.
- Becoming suddenly cheerful after a period of depression (may mean the youth has already made the decision to escape their problems through suicide).

All suicidal thoughts or threats must be taken seriously, as should any behaviour that is out of character for your friend. Trust your instincts. If you are concerned about someone, tell others about it. Get help from family, friends, clergy, teachers, counsellors, doctors, crisis lines, mental health services or hospital emergency departments.

Risk factors

A person may be more likely to consider suicide if some of these factors apply in their life:

- Previous suicide attempt or gesture.
- Family History of suicidal behaviour.
- Feelings of hopelessness or isolation.
- Psychiatric disorders or mental illness.
- Substance use or abuse.
- Life stressors, such as interpersonal losses and legal or disciplinary problems.
- Physical abuse.

- Sexual abuse.
- Sexual orientation (gay, lesbian and trans-gendered).
- Juvenile delinquency.
- School or work problems.
- Contagion or imitation (the suicide of a friend or exposure to media reports of suicide).
- Chronic physical illness.
- Living in isolation.
- Access to more lethal means, such as firearms and medication.
- Impulsive behaviours.
- Homelessness.

Some young people in minority or marginalized groups have an increased risk of suicide.

Protective Factors

Certain factors and circumstances in a person's life are thought to provide some protection against suicide and suicidal behaviours.

A time of change

The period of adolescence can be an exciting time as you emerge from the shadow of parents or guardians to find a new sense of independence and freedom. It can also be a time of uncertainty –and with good reason –your brain is changing and you may find yourself and your peers having periods of moodiness, and less able to control your emotions. Your body is also going through a lot of change; in fact during these years you are likely to grow 15 percent in both height and weight.

Protective factors

Fortunately, most of us emerge from these years of uncertainty with few or no permanent scars or thoughts of suicide. Research has shown that there are a number of factors that can ease your transition into adolescence and help to protect and strengthen you during this developmental stage.

External factors

- Family cohesion, e.g., involvement, shared interests and emotional support.
- Good relationships with other youth and adults.
- Academic achievement.
- Stable environment.
- Social integration and opportunities to participate in activities.
- Responsibilities for other people or pets.
- Adequate care for substance use, physical and mental disorders.
- Lack of access to means for suicidal behaviour.
- Connection to a religious community.

- Internal Factors.

Internal factors

- Sense of belonging.
- Sociability, i.e., ability to be a friend.
- Love of learning.
- Perceived connectedness to school.
- Sense of worth and self-confidence.
- Self-motivation.
- Help-seeking and advice-seeking behaviour.
- Service, i.e., gives of self in service to others or a cause.
- Life skills, e.g., good decision-making, assertiveness, impulse control, coping skills, flexibility and perseverance.
- How can you build and enhance your protective factors?

1. Build healthy connections with other people

Research in the field of youth development and resiliency shows that building stronger connections with family, school, other adults and peers, and getting involved in community activities, are some of the most important ways to develop protective factors in your life. Work with friends or seek advice from a trusted adult to find volunteer, work and recreation opportunities in the community.

2. Take some time to identify your strengths. You can do this on your own or seek some input from friends or a trusted adult. Things to think about include:

- In previous difficult situations, how did you cope, what did you do?
- Who do you talk to when experiencing stress? How do they help? Can they help you now and in the future? Who else can help?
- Can you use what you have learned in other situations to help you now and in the future?

3. Build yourself a network of support.

Develop or strengthen your relationship with your parents, teachers, coaches, friends. Find a mentor who encourages you to excel, supports you in positive challenges and generally provides welcome direction in your preferred pursuits. Positive influences in your life will demonstrate attitudes and messages of optimism, strength and overcoming difficulties.

Myths about Suicide

There are many myths about adolescent suicide. Not having correct information may prevent you from helping someone who may be at risk.

Here are some common myths and facts:

Myth: Young people do not know about suicide.

Fact: Not true. Suicide is more familiar to adolescents than adults might think. Numerous surveys report adolescents have not only thought about suicide themselves but also know someone who has attempted or died by suicide.

Myth: Talking about suicide will give my friend the idea to attempt suicide.

Fact: This myth is one of the big, persistent ones but it is not true. Asking a friend if he or she is thinking about suicide will give them the opportunity to speak openly about their distress. When you ask, you show that you care. Your support may encourage your friend to seek help.

Myth: Suicide happens without warning.

Fact: Suicide very rarely happens without any warning at all. Even when a friend's suicidal behaviour seems impulsive, there likely have been prior warning signs and behaviours – she might have talked about having no reason to live or he may have been giving away some prized possessions.

Myth: If my friend is suicidal now, he will be suicidal forever.

Fact: No, your friend's suicidal thoughts may be related to a temporary situation that is causing him great stress or emotional pain. These feelings will pass especially if he has help to work through this difficult time in his life.

Myth: My friend will be angry if I try to help her.

Fact: Yes, your friend might become angry or defensive when you first offer to help her. She may be embarrassed by or ashamed of her suicidal thoughts or she may think she does not need help. Sometimes friends resist offers of help as a way of testing how much you are prepared to help them.

Myth: My friend seems to be feeling better so he is no longer at risk.

Fact: Unfortunately, this is not necessarily true. A sudden improvement in his emotional state may mean she has made the decision to act on her thoughts of suicide. She still needs your help – perhaps even more than ever.

Asking the Question

Are you thinking about Suicide?

If you recognize warning signs in a friend, it is important to determine if they are thinking about or planning suicide. The only way you can do this is to ask them directly: are you thinking about suicide?

Asking someone if they are thinking about suicide can be difficult. You may feel anxious or nervous or you may not want to ask the question at all just in case your friend says yes.

You might also worry that if you ask your friend about suicide, they will become suicidal. However, asking the question can be the first step in getting help for your friend because now they have “permission” to talk about their feelings.

It takes courage and caring to ask someone this question. If you are too anxious to approach your friend by yourself, ask your parents, an older sibling or friend, or another trusted adult to help you.

You may want to begin a conversation with your friend by telling them you have noticed something seems to be wrong and you are concerned. When you are ready: stay calm, listen actively, and do not judge your friend or what they may tell you.

Ask these three questions:

Are you thinking of suicide?

Do you have a plan?

Do you have a way to do it?

If your friend answers yes to all three of these questions, get help immediately.

Sometimes your friend may deny thoughts of suicide or they may become angry. Trust your feelings – don’t give up if you really believe something is wrong. You may need to ask more than once. Your friend may not be willing to disclose anything until they are sure you are sincere.

If your friend is thinking about suicide, do not agree to keep their thoughts secret and do not try to help them all by yourself. Reassure your friend help is available and that asking for help with their problems is a sign of strength. Many people can help including your family and friends, guidance counsellors, teachers, coaches, crisis line counselors, a family doctor, or your clergy person.

Do not forget to look after yourself, practice self-care. Learning that your friend is suicidal and trying to help them can be very stressful.

Confidentiality

“Can you keep a secret?” “Will you promise not to tell anyone?”

Has a friend ever shared something with you and then asked you to keep this information confidential? Maybe your friend has even made you promise to keep the secret before saying anything.

While it is important to know how to keep secrets, it is even more important to know when not to keep them. A friend who reveals thoughts of suicide or self-harm or harm to others not only needs your help but also the help of adults. This is not a secret you should agree to safeguard.

In fact, if a friend asks you to promise not to tell anyone else what he is about to share, you may want to make it clear if the secret involves harm to him or others, you cannot agree to this. If he then refuses to say anything but you suspect the secret is about suicide, you need to ask directly: Are you thinking about suicide?

When you promise to keep someone's suicidal thoughts a secret, you may believe you are showing loyalty to your friend. However, there are critical reasons why you cannot make or keep this promise:

- By keeping your friend's thoughts of suicide secret, it prevents him or her from getting necessary help.
- When you agree to keep this secret, it leaves you alone to cope with a very difficult situation. If your friend then attempts or dies by suicide, you may feel tremendous guilt because you knew and did not say anything.

You may worry if you break your friend's confidence, she will be angry or she will deny what she told you. You may know of other situations when someone broke a friend's confidence and then was called untrustworthy or disloyal. Perhaps, the friendship came to an end. You may be concerned if other friends find out what happened, they will never confide in you again.

These concerns are not unrealistic – these may be ways your friend will react. But, she may also be very grateful you have intervened to get her the help she needs.

Regardless of the anticipated or real outcome, you still need to tell an adult who can help. You have to put your friend's safety before the friendship. It is better to have someone who is angry with you than having to cope with their death.

Even when it is in your friend's best interests that you break their confidence, it takes a lot of self-assurance to do so. If you find there are negative consequences you cannot deal with yourself, do not hesitate to speak with your parents or another trusted adult about how to handle the situation.

Getting help for yourself or others

Sometimes, when we are facing problems ourselves or we have a friend who is troubled, the hardest thing to do is to ask or look for help. Even when the problem is really serious, such as having thoughts

of suicide, you still may be reluctant to ask someone for help. In some cases, your friend may not seek help from anyone.

Adults, too, may not want to get help for their problems. For people of all ages, there may be real or imagined barriers to looking for help including the belief we can solve our problems by ourselves, thinking that nothing can help or no one will understand; and the stigma attached to mental illness and suicide.

Other issues that may prevent people from finding help include not knowing where to find the people or agencies in your community who may be able to assist you, and services that are either difficult to access or too costly.

If you feel like you are in immediate danger of harming yourself or that a friend is at risk of suicide, please seek help right away.

Call 9-1-1 or your local emergency number for assistance.

Finding Help for Yourself

One of the first things you can do to help yourself if you have mental health issues or if you are feeling suicidal is to acknowledge to yourself you have a problem and you need the help and support of others. It may be difficult to do this but it is the first step in finding solutions to your problems other than suicide.

Another important part of helping yourself through difficult times is learning not to blame yourself. Being unwell, whether you have a physical or mental illness, is not a sign you are weak or a failure. However, looking and asking for help is a sign of strength and courage.

If you can not look for help on your own, ask someone else like your parents, a teacher, or a mental health professional to support and assist you in finding appropriate help. If you are thinking about suicide, do not ask your friends to keep your thoughts and/or plans a secret; instead ask for their help in getting further support and guidance from their parents or other adults who can access professional help.

When you are feeling down or suicidal, you need to take care of yourself. You need to try as much as possible to eat well, get enough sleep, and stay active. Do not use alcohol or drugs to cope with or avoid your problems.

Most of all, believe that your life can change for the better. It may take a few tries to find the right help and sometimes it may seem like things are getting worse instead of better but always remember people can and do recover from mental illness and thoughts of suicide.

Helping a Friend or Peer

Your friend may be trying to cope with her emotional problems by herself. Your teammate seems to be unhappy a lot of the time and he is keeping to himself more and more. When friends or peers are having trouble, you can be an important source of support to them.

Even though you can see your friend needs help, she may not be willing to accept your concern or offers of assistance. There may be a variety of reasons for this – the stigma attached to suicide and help-seeking for mental health issues may cause her to be embarrassed or ashamed by her thoughts or her illness.

One of the best things you can do to help your friend is to ask him directly if he is thinking about suicide. It can be difficult to do this – your friend might become angry with you and tell you to leave him alone. Or you might worry that by asking him if he is suicidal, it will make him think about suicide. This is a myth. When you ask someone if they are suicidal, you show you care and are concerned about them. Asking someone if they are suicidal can be an important first step in getting help as they now can acknowledge how they are feeling.

If your friend denies she is suicidal but your instincts tell you to be concerned, do not give up; you may have to ask more than once. If the answer to the question is yes, do not promise to keep your friend's thoughts a secret. You must tell an adult so she can get the help she needs. You can do a lot to support your friend but if she needs professional therapy or medications, her parents and other caregivers must become involved.

There are other ways you can support your friend. It may be appropriate to accompany your friend to the counsellor's office (but keep in mind you may not be allowed to be a part of the counselling session). Show your ongoing support by keeping in touch with her and expressing your belief in her recovery.

Resources

Resources on the Web

The following are a few websites for more information on mental health and illness and youth suicide.

Kids Help Phone (kidshelpphone.ca)

Mind Your Mind (mindyourmind.ca)

Deal.org (deal.org)

Mental Health and High School (cmha.ca/highschool/english.htm)

Grip (griponlife.ca)

Books for Further Reading

Mental Health and Illness

Biviano, K., Brennan, Z., et al. (2002). *Creating girl_x: Young people's creative messages of hope*. Geelong, Victoria: Clockwork: Young People's Health Service.

Boone, J., Fayter, A., & McIntyre, J. (2006). *Living in reality: Teen reflections on depression*. Calgary, AB: Tiberious Publishing.

Copeland, M. E., & Copans, S. (2002). *Recovering from depression: A workbook for teens* [Revised Edition]. Boston, MA: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Cobain, B. (1998). *When nothing matters anymore: A survival guide for depressed teens*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

Gordon, S. (1985). *When living hurts*. New York, NY: Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

Suicide Prevention

Crook, M. (2003). *Out of the darkness: Teens and suicide*. Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press.

Frankel, B., & Kranz, R. (1994). *Straight talk about... Teenage suicide*. New York, NY: Facts on File, Inc.

Nelson, R. E., & Galas, J. C. (1994). *The power to prevent suicide: A guide for teens helping teens*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

Bereavement, Grief, and Loss

Gootman, M. E. (1994). *When a friend dies: A book for teens about grieving & healing*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

Grollman, E. A. (1993). *Straight talk about death for teenagers: How to cope with losing someone you love*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Grollman, E. A., & Malikow, M. (1999). *Living when a young friend commits suicide or even starts talking about it*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Hipp, E. (1995). *Help for the hard times: Getting through loss*. Center City, MN: Hazelden.

Hughes, L. B. (2005). *You are not alone: Teens talk about life after the loss of a parent*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Kuklin, S. (1994). *After a suicide: Young people speak up*. New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Mazetti, K. (2004). *God and I broke up*. Toronto, ON: Groundwood Books. [Fiction]