

Suicide Prevention

Why do people commit suicide?

The common link among people who kill themselves is the belief that suicide is the only solution to a set of overwhelming feelings. The attraction of suicide is that it will finally end these unbearable feelings. The tragedy of suicide is that intense emotional distress often blinds people to the alternative solutions, yet other solutions are almost always available. We all experience feelings of loneliness, depression, helplessness, and hopelessness from time to time. The death of a family member, the breakup of a relationship, blows to one's self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness, and/or major financial setbacks are serious problems which all of us may have to face at some point in our lives. Because each person's emotional makeup is unique, each of us responds to situations differently.

In considering whether a person may be suicidal, it is imperative that the crisis be evaluated from that person's perspective. What may seem of minor importance to one, can be of major importance to another—and an event that may be insignificant to one can be extremely distressful to another. Regardless of the nature of the crisis, if a person feels overwhelmed, there is danger that suicide may seem an attractive solution.

Danger Signals

At least 70 percent of all people committing suicide give some clue as to their intentions before the attempt. Becoming aware of these clues and the severity of the person's problems can help prevent such a tragedy. If a person you know is going through a particularly stressful situation—perhaps having difficulty maintaining a meaningful relationship, having consistent failure in meeting pre-set goals, or even experiencing stress at having failed an important test—also watch for other signs of crisis.

Many persons convey their intentions directly with statements such as “I feel like killing myself,” or “I don't know how much longer I can take this”. Others in crisis may hint at a detailed suicide plan with statements such as “I've been saving up my pills in case things get really bad,” or “lately I've been driving my car like I really don't care what happens”. In general, statements describing feelings of depression, helplessness, extreme loneliness, and/or hopelessness may suggest suicidal thoughts. It is important to listen to these “cries for help” because they are usually desperate attempts to communicate to others the need to be understood and helped.

Often persons thinking about suicide show outward changes in their behavior. They may prepare for death by giving away prized possessions, making a will, or putting other affairs in order. They may withdraw from those around them, change eating or sleeping patterns, or lose interest in prior activities or relationships. A sudden, intense lift in spirits may also be a danger signal, as it may indicate the person already feels a sense of relief knowing the problems will “soon be ended”.

MYTHS ABOUT SUICIDE

MYTH: “You have to be crazy to even think about suicide.”

FACT: Most people have thought of suicide from time to time. Most suicides attempts are made by intelligent, temporarily confused individuals who are expecting too much of themselves, especially in the midst of a crisis.

MYTH: “Once a person has made a serious suicide attempt, that person is unlikely to make another.”

FACT: The opposite is often true. Persons who have made prior suicide attempts may be at greater risk of actually committing suicide; for some, suicide attempts may seem easier a second or third time.

MYTH: “Talking about suicide may give a person the idea.”

FACT: The crisis and resulting emotional distress will already have triggered the thought in a vulnerable person. Your openness and concern in asking about suicide will allow the person experiencing pain to talk about the problem which may help reduce his or her anxiety. This may also allow the person with suicidal thoughts to feel less lonely or isolated, and perhaps a bit relieved.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Most suicides can be prevented by sensitive responses to the person in crisis. If you think someone you know may be suicidal, you should:

Remain calm. In most instances, there is no rush. Sit and listen—really listen to what the person is saying. Give understanding and active emotional support for his or her feelings.

Deal directly with the topic of suicide. Most individuals have mixed feelings about death and dying and are open to help. Don't be afraid to ask or talk directly about suicide.

Encourage problem solving and positive actions. Remember that the person involved in emotional crisis is not thinking clearly; encourage him or her to refrain from making any serious, irreversible decisions while in a crisis. Talk about the positive alternatives which may establish hope for the future.

Get assistance. Although you want to help, do not take full responsibility by trying to be the sole counsel. Seek out resources which can lend qualified help, even if it means breaking a confidence. Let the troubled person know you are concerned—so concerned that you are willing to arrange help beyond that which you can offer.

Resources

Ulifeline – <http://www.ulifeline.org>

The Jed Foundation – <http://www.jedfoundation.org/students>

The American Association of Suicidology – <http://www.suicidology.org>

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention – <http://www.afsp.org>

San Diego State University Counseling & Psychological Services -
http://go.sdsu.edu/student_affairs/cps/suicide.aspx

The National Hopeline Network 1-800-SUICIDE (800-784-2433)

St. Francis Mental Health Crisis Line 660-562-2227 or 800-841-3866

Northwest Missouri State University Wellness Center 660-562-1348