

signs, remember that the person at risk has chosen you as someone who might be receptive to these communications. Many suicides told others they were suicidal shortly before their deaths.

“Anyone who tries to kill himself has got to be crazy.”

NOT TRUE. Only about 10 to 15% of all suicidal people are psychotic or have delusional beliefs about reality. Suicidal people suffer from depression, despair, emotional pain and anguish, but may not otherwise exhibit behavior associated with mental illness. Having thoughts of suicide is not a sign of insanity. Most people have had thoughts of suicide at some point in their lives.

“Talking about suicide may give someone the idea.”

NOT TRUE. People already have the idea of suicide; in New York City it's in the headlines of the newspapers every week. You don't give a suicidal person morbid ideas by talking about suicide. The opposite is true—bringing up the subject and discussing it openly is one of the most helpful things you can do. Having an opportunity to talk about it can be a great relief to a despairing person.

“If a person is planning to kill himself, nothing is going to stop him.”

NOT TRUE. The fact that the person is still alive is sufficient proof that part of him wants to remain alive. Suicidal people are ambivalent. Part of them wants to remain alive; and part of them doesn't want death as much it wants the pain to stop. The impulse to use suicide as an end to the pain, however overpowering, does not last forever. The part of the person that wants to live can reassert itself even after a fatal decision is made. Recently a man who had survived a suicide leap from the Manhattan Bridge was interviewed a few months later on a TV talk show. He said that after he jumped the first thing that flashed through his mind was “This is a mistake.”

Suicide prevention is not something that occurs at the last minute. It is rare for people to suddenly become suicidal. The completed suicide is the end of a long term downward spiral. Suicide prevention means having help and assistance available at any point in this process. The effectiveness of crisis hotlines such as The Samaritans is sometimes criticized on the grounds that a majority of their callers are not acutely suicidal at the time they call. This is a misguided point of view. People in despair need assistance before they get worse AND as they get better.

Myths of Suicide

“People who do it, don't talk about it; and people who talk about it, don't do it.”

NOT TRUE. Many studies have shown that more than 75% of all completed suicides did something in the few months before their death to indicate to others that they were deeply despairing or depressed. Suicide is very difficult to talk about; and efforts at communication—see the “warning signs”—are often indirect and obscure. If you start to pick up on the warning