

Teen Suicide: Recognize, Prevent

Suicide is the eighth major cause of death in the United States, ranking second — after accidents — among adolescents and young adults. In 1984 (the last year for which official figures are available), close to 2000 Americans between the ages of 15 and 19 took their own lives.

Yet Charlotte Ross, director of the Youth Suicide National Center in Washington, D.C., asserts: "Suicide can be a preventable cause of death." A person thinking about taking his own life often exhibits warning signs, such as depression, anxiety, hostility, or anger. Learning to recognize these signs may save someone's life.

Most suicides are the consequence of the psychiatric disease called depression. These symptoms distinguish real depression from occasional unhappiness:

1. Viewing things only in the most negative terms. The depressed person is convinced life will never get better.
2. Avoiding friends and social activities. Sudden withdrawal is a signal of distress.
3. Changing daily patterns dramatically. When a good sleeper suddenly becomes an insomniac, a light eater develops a ravenous appetite, a quiet person turns hyperactive, there's a chance he's suffering from depression. If these changes are accompanied by atypical slowness of speech or move-

ment, the probability of clinical depression is greater.

Not all depressed people are suicidal. Many older adults know that periods of sadness will pass. They are also more likely to seek professional help. Adolescents and younger adults, however, often think depression will never end.

Experts tell us some suicidal people provide clear-cut signals of their plans. For instance, a high-school student who's broken up with his girlfriend and has decided to take his life may parcel out his possessions to his family and friends, telling them, "I won't be needing this anymore."

Some potential suicides give verbal signals. When a friend or relative hints at suicide, there are specific ways you can help:

Listen. If a friend goes into an emotional tailspin, you can say, "I know you've been through a hard time and wondered if you'd like to talk about it." At the least, it may prompt him to seek professional help. Don't give gratuitous advice or offer solutions. Don't make light of the situation.

Be honest. If the person's words or actions scare you, say so. If you're worried or don't know how to respond, say so.

Share feelings. Younger people are often touchy and withdrawn. Says one clinical social worker, "Instead of a direct approach — which often makes

them clam up — I let students know that I get depressed on occasion and know how they feel." By sharing your own "down" experiences, you tell the person that occasional depression is normal, that he is not alone.

Get help. If he still sounds suicidal, give him the number of a suicide-prevention counselor. If you cannot find a local suicide hot line in the telephone book, call the American Institute of Suicidology at (303) 692-0985. Get the troubled person to speak to a physician or minister; sometimes only consultation with a professional can help. Whatever it takes, don't let up until the threat of suicide is gone. Young people should remember: you may be risking your friend's life if you fail to report suicidal messages.

"The fear that talking about suicide is somehow self-fulfilling is unwarranted," says Ross. "If the individual is not thinking about suicide, chances are he'll be flattered by your concern." But if he is, your bringing up the subject may be exactly what he wants.

When in doubt, it's always better to ask the person directly if he's considering suicide, rather than hope the problem will go away. Many times suicidal thoughts do disappear without intervention. But a life is too important to risk. Learn the signs of potential suicide and do something when you see them.

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