

Suicide awareness— Know the signs

More people die by suicide in the United States than from auto accidents.

Understanding suicide

Suicide is a serious public health problem. In the United States, more than 43,000 people die each year by suicide.¹ Friends and family left behind often struggle with intense feelings of emotional pain, grief, loss, and guilt. The social stigma of suicide further complicates the mourning process. Survivors may blame themselves or feel angry and abandoned.

Common misconceptions

There are many myths about suicide. These include the following:

- **Most people who talk about suicide or threaten to kill themselves will never do it.** Actually, many people who complete suicide have talked about it or hinted at it. All threats should be taken seriously.
- **It's best not to plant the idea of suicide by talking about it with someone who seems depressed.** On the contrary, people contemplating suicide are often relieved to be asked if they've been thinking of hurting themselves.

- **Only crazy people commit suicide.** While many people who kill themselves are clinically depressed, most are in touch with reality and are not psychotic.
- **If a person is determined to commit suicide, nothing will stop them.** Most suicidal people feel ambivalent and are torn between the desire to live and the desire to die. They just want the emotional pain to stop and see no other way out.
- **Suicide happens more often during the holidays, such as Christmas and Thanksgiving.** Suicide rates are higher during the spring.

Warning signs and risk factors

Many people who commit suicide communicate their intent ahead of time. Suicide is always a risk for people who show the signs and symptoms of major depression. Warning signs include:

- Withdrawal and isolation from family and friends
- Loss of interest in activities, friends, school, and work
- Giving away prized possessions

- Persistent hopelessness, depressed mood or a sudden change from a depressed mood to an energetic one (this may indicate the person has made a decision to take his or her life)
- Talking about death and making statements such as “There’s nothing to live for” or “The world is better off without me”
- Looking for ways to die
- Obtaining a way to end his or her life, such as a gun or medications
- Having a plan to die and the ability to carry it out

While suicide touches all ages, genders and ethnicities, there are certain risk factors that increase its likelihood. These include:

- Prior suicide attempts
- Mental health disorders such as major depression
- Alcohol and drug use
- Physical illness
- Family history of suicide or violence
- Access to lethal means, such as firearms or medications

1. 2014 data, released December 2015, CDC Web Based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS)



Prevention tips

If you believe someone may be thinking about suicide:

- Ask the person directly and listen without judging
- Stay with the person until you can get further help
- Remove any objects that could be used in a suicide attempt
- Call a suicide hotline such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) and follow their advice
- Call 911 if the person is in immediate danger

How to respond

If you recognize the warning signs in yourself or a friend, it's critical to contact a mental health provider, physician, or suicide/crisis hotline for advice and help. Acting quickly can make the difference between life and death.

Hospitalization is often necessary after an attempt or when a person's risk of suicide is high. Once the person is medically stable, therapy with a trained professional can help him or her recover from depression and develop coping skills. Antidepressants and other medications may be prescribed in addition to therapy. Addiction treatment may be necessary if the person is also struggling with alcohol or other drugs. As with other major illnesses, recovery is a process. The survivor will benefit from the caring support and patience of loved ones and friends.

Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
www.samhsa.gov/suicide-prevention

National Institutes of Health
www.nlm.nih.gov/health/topics/suicide-prevention/index.shtml

Employee Assistance Program
For Professional Consultation

Call 800-424-4485

TTY Users: 800-456-4006