



Ask the Question: Preventing Suicide in Teens



The stress of being a teen is hard for many kids to handle, especially if they have a mental health condition. Things like rejection, failure, breakups, trouble at school and family fights are especially hard.

Keep in mind, teens can take action very quickly without thinking things through, so it's important to spend regular time with your teen and ask them if they're thinking of suicide if you are concerned.

Ways to Help Teens with Mental Health:

- Encourage your teen to spend time with friends and family members who are supportive and have a positive influence.
- Watch their social media accounts. Social media can give great support, but can also expose teens to bullying. You can also look for warning signs.
- Help your teen lead a healthy lifestyle. Make sure they eat well, exercise and get regular sleep.
- Keep an eye on medications that may impact their moods. If a prescription is causing them to feel and act sad or angry, talk with their doctor.
- Safely and securely store firearms, alcohol and medications. This is an important step we can all take to help teens who may experience impulsive thoughts about suicide.

- Talk about mental health and suicide with your teen, even if you don't see any signs. Having these discussions ahead of a crisis can help prevent one.
 - Ask them if they ever feel sad, anxious or depressed. Ask them to talk about their feelings and listen. Don't dismiss their problems.
 - Acknowledge their feelings. Be sure to tell them their feelings are understandable, that you care about them and that you want to support them.
 - Tell them you love them and that together, you can work through this. Tell them you care and that you're here if they need you.
 - If you're aware of warning signs of suicide, ask them if they've ever thought of suicide.

Warning Signs

Warning signs of suicide include:

Talking or writing about killing themselves, or not being a problem much longer; feeling hopeless, trapped or in unbearable pain; having no reason to live; or being a burden to others.

A big change in any of these moods or emotions:

- Depression, fatigue or anxiety
- Loss of interest in things they usually enjoy
- Humiliation or shame
- Agitation, aggression, irritation or anger

Acting differently. Concerning behaviors include:

- Doing risky or self-destructive things that they normally wouldn't do, like having sex, trying alcohol or drugs, or driving recklessly
- Looking for a way to end their lives
- Withdrawing from activities, friends or family
- Changing sleep patterns – sleeping a lot more or a lot less than usual
- Changing eating habits – eating a lot more or a lot less than usual
- Having severe mood swings, changing behavior or the presence of entirely new behaviors, especially when related to a major life event
- Missing assignments or failing tests when they normally wouldn't
- Missing work when they normally wouldn't

Who's at Higher Risk?

It's important to know if your teen is at higher risk of suicide so you watch them even more closely or get them help. Things that can increase the risk of suicide in teens include a past suicide attempt or negative life events that lead to humiliation, shame or despair. This may include the loss of a relationship or something important to them. Teens with a history of physical or sexual abuse, or exposure to violence or bullying may also be at higher risk.

What You Can Do



Take firearms offsite to a trusted friend or family member. You can also call local police or a gun range for temporary storage. Or, store them unloaded in a safe or combination-locked location.



Remove access to other weapons and sharp objects like knives or razor blades.



Store all medications in a lock box or locked medicine cabinet. Throw away unused medications.



Keep alcohol and illegal drugs out of the home.



Lock up pesticides and other poisonous household chemicals.



Provide supervision or remain with a teen who reports suicidal thoughts until receiving a mental health evaluation.

If you're worried about someone who might be thinking about suicide, it's important to ask the question:

Are you thinking about suicide?

How to Ask the Question:

For younger kids, you may need to define suicide. *Suicide is when someone ends his or her own life, or does something to make himself or herself die.* If they say yes, ask them: *Can I talk more with you about those thoughts?* Find out as much as you can: *Have you thought about a plan of how you would attempt suicide? Have you thought about when you may attempt suicide?* The more detailed the plan and the more likely it is that the person has the ability to act on the plan, the more danger they are in right now.

If there is risk of suicide, **call the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988** to speak with a mental health professional available 24/7 or go to your local emergency room. Don't wait. Don't leave the teen alone.

Don't be afraid to use the word suicide. It won't give them ideas; instead, it may give them relief. Use a non-judgmental, matter-of-fact approach. Be sure to tell them: *Your feelings are understandable. I care about you. I want to support you. I am proud of you for sharing your feelings.*

Research shows that offering someone a safe place to open up about their thoughts and feelings can be an important step into getting them the help they need. It also shows them someone cares about their well-being. Asking about the way they will try suicide is also shown to make a difference.

Sources: Krames, The StayWell Company, LLC., National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute of Mental Health, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health Helpline Center.

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