

Facts about Suicide in Adolescents

Suicide is complicated and involves the interplay of multiple risk factors. It is not simply the result of stress or difficult life circumstances. Many people who die by suicide have a mental health condition. In teens, the behavioral health conditions most closely linked to suicide risk are major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, conduct disorder, eating disorders, and substance abuse problems. Although in some cases these conditions may be precipitated by environmental stressors, they can also occur as a result of changes in brain chemistry, even in the absence of an identifiable or obvious “trigger.”

Other key risk factors for suicide include the following:

- Personality characteristics, such as hopelessness, low self-esteem, impulsivity, risk-taking, and poor problem-solving or coping skills
- Family characteristics, such as family history of suicidal behavior or mental health problems, death of a close family member, and problems in the parent-child relationship
- Childhood abuse, neglect, or trauma
- Stressful life circumstances, such as physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse; breaking up of a romantic relationship; school problems; bullying by peers; trouble with the law; and suicide of a peer
- Access to lethal means, especially in the home

It is important to remember that the vast majority of teens who experience even very stressful life events do not become suicidal. But in some cases, such experiences can be a catalyst for suicidal behavior in teens who are already struggling with depression or other mental health problems. In others, traumatic experiences (such as prolonged bullying) can precipitate depression, anxiety, abuse of alcohol or drugs, or another mental health condition, which can increase suicide risk. Conversely, existing mental health conditions may also lead to stressful life experiences, which may then exacerbate the underlying illness and in turn increase suicide risk.

Help Is Available

If there are concerns about a student’s emotional or mental health, a referral should be made to an appropriate mental health professional for assessment, diagnosis, and possible treatment. Mental health resources that may be available include the following:

- School-based mental health professionals
- Community mental health providers and clinics
- Emergency psychiatric screening centers
- Children’s mobile response programs

Pediatricians and primary care providers can also be a source of mental health referrals. Many of them are also well-versed in recognizing and treating certain mental health conditions like depression.

Information and referrals regarding treatment for mental and substance use disorders are available at SAMHSA’s National Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357). This is a free, confidential service open 24/7.

Crisis Lines

A crisis line is a service that provides free, confidential support and resources for people in emotional distress. The service is provided by a trained crisis counselor on the phone and in some cases by text and/or chat. You can call or text for help with someone you're worried about or for yourself. In addition to the resources listed below, some states have their own crisis lines with phone, text, and/or chat services.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Call 800-273-TALK (8255)

Chat service and other information: Go to www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Crisis Text Line

Text HOME to 741741

Other information: Go to www.crisistextline.org

Trevor Project

Provides crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) young people ages 13–24

Trevor Lifeline: Call 1-866-488-7386

TrevorText: Text TREVOR to 1-202-304-1200

TrevorChat and other information and resources: Go to www.trevorproject.org

Youth Warning Signs and What to Do in a Crisis

When you are concerned that a person may be suicidal, look for changes in behavior or the presence of entirely new behaviors. This is of greatest concern if the new or changed behavior is related to a painful event, loss, or change, such as losing a friend or classmate to suicide. Most people who take their lives exhibit one or more warning signs, either through what they say or what they do.

Take any threat or talk about suicide seriously. Start by telling the person that you are concerned. Don't be afraid to ask whether she or he is considering suicide or has a plan or method in mind. Research shows that asking someone directly about suicide will not "put the idea in their head." Rather, the person in distress will often feel relieved that someone cares enough to talk about this issue with them.

Below is a list of warning signs and steps to take specifically for youth. It was developed by a consensus panel of experts in the field. See www.youthsuicidewarningsigns.org.

Youth Warning Signs	What to Do
<p>Leaders in the suicide prevention field agree that the following warning signs indicate a young person may be at risk for suicide:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Talking about or making plans for suicide• Expressing hopelessness about the future• Displaying severe/overwhelming emotional pain or distress	<p>If you notice any of these signs in a student, take these recommended steps right away:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Do not leave the student alone and unsupervised. Make sure the student is in a secure environment supervised by caring adults until he or she can be seen by the school mental health contact.2. Make sure the student is escorted to the school's mental health professional.3. Provide any additional information to the school's mental health contact that will assist with the assessment of the student.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Showing worrisome behavioral cues or marked changes in behavior, particularly in the presence of the warning signs above. Specifically, this includes significant:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Withdrawal from or change in social connections or situations○ Changes in sleep (increased or decreased)○ Anger or hostility that seems out of character or out of context○ Recent increased agitation or irritability	<h3>What to Do</h3> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Ask if the student is okay or if he or she is having thoughts of suicide.2. Express your concern about what you are observing in his or her behavior.3. Listen attentively and nonjudgmentally.4. Reflect what the student shares and let the student know he or she has been heard.5. Tell the student that he or she is not alone.6. Let the student know there are treatments available that can help.7. If you or the student are concerned, guide him or her to additional professional help, or to call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, a 24-hour toll-free phone line for people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress: 1-800-273-TALK (8255).