

More Than a Bad Feeling: How to Spot and Help a Suicidal Teen

Recently, a television show about teen suicide, *13 Reasons Why*, has prompted many important discussions among young people, teachers and parents about teenage depression and the at-times fatal consequences of not taking action.

As physicians who specialize in child and adolescent psychiatry, our team works with young people and adults who have contemplated suicide and once felt like they had no other option. If someone you care about may be considering taking his or her own life, there are warning signs you can look for, professional support available, and helpful ways to respond to a loved one in need.

Risk Factors in Teenagers

- Prior suicide attempt
- Drug and alcohol use
- History of mental illness

- Childhood abuse
- Exposure to a traumatic event
- Lack of a support from friends or family
- Isolation
- Access to a gun or other means to attempt suicide
- Hostile home, social or school environment
- Exposure to other teen or family suicides
- Victim of bullying at school or online

Warning Signs

- Verbal hints about suicide or saying other goodbye statements
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Loss of interest in hobbies or activities that they once enjoyed
- Violent, rebellious behavior, or angry outbursts
- Running away
- Drug and alcohol use
- Unusual neglect of personal appearance
- Persistent boredom, difficulty concentrating
- Poor energy and not wanting to get out of bed
- Change in the quality of schoolwork or declining grades
- Frequent complaints about physical symptoms related to emotions, such as stomach aches, headaches, fatigue or pain
- Rejecting praise or rewards

What You Can Do To Help

Don't be afraid to act. Saying something to a loved one in need is more helpful than simply hoping your instincts are wrong. You can also approach a mental health professional who can guide you in how to best help a loved one.

Offering Support:

DO:

- **Take them seriously.** If you are concerned or have doubts if someone is suicidal, call 911 immediately so a professional can evaluate the situation.
- Speak with them privately.
- Be sensitive, non-judgmental, patient and calm.
- **Allow the person** to express himself or herself and listen attentively.

- Reassure them that no one experiences one feeling forever. Feelings are temporary. Suicide does not provide relief from temporary suffering, and help is available.
- Directly ask them if they are considering suicide.
- Immediately remove access to all weapons, knives, guns, sharps, medications (over the counter and prescription) or potentially dangerous items. Place them under lock and key
- Help them find assistance by calling 911 and getting in touch with a mental health professional.
- Let them know that they are important to you.

Don't:

- **Don't act shocked.**
- **Don't promise to keep it to yourself.**
- Don't assume that they would never attempt suicide.
- Don't argue with them about the meaning of life.
- **Don't feel responsible or give advice.** They need professional help.
- Don't leave them alone.

Seek professional help.

There are resources in place to help walk you through what to do to help.

Call or encourage the person to call the free, confidential National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-TALK** or **1-800-SUICIDE**. They can also **text TALK** to **741741** and get in contact with a crisis counselor.

For teens who identify as LGBTQ they can call the LGBTQ Helpline at **(305) 646-3600**.

If they refuse help and you are concerned they are suicidal, call 911 immediately. If the person is not acutely suicidal, call 305-355-9028 to schedule an outpatient appointment with a UMiami Health child and adolescent psychiatrist. Depression and suicidal feelings are treatable and require the attention of a mental health professional.

Mental illness is a real problem that affects the lives of many children and adolescents. However, help is available. There are social workers, counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists who work together to use evidence based therapies and medications to treat mental illness. We are here to offer support in the most challenging times and to save lives.

In Their Words Contributor



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