

# WHEN YOU FEAR SOMEONE MAY TAKE THEIR LIFE

(From the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention website: [www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org))

*The comments contained in this Website are based on professional advice, published experience, and expert opinion, but do NOT represent therapeutic recommendation or prescription. For specific information and advice, consult your personal clinician.*

Most suicides give some warning of their intentions. The most effective way to prevent a friend or loved one from taking their life is to recognize when someone is at risk, take the warning signs seriously and know how to respond.

The depression and emotional crises that so often precede suicides are — in most cases — both recognizable and treatable.

## KNOW THE RISK FACTORS

- **Previous suicide attempts:** Between 20 and 50 percent of people who kill themselves had previously attempted suicide. Those who have made serious suicide attempts are at much higher risk for actually taking their lives.
- **Talking about death or suicide:** Suicidal individuals often talk about suicide directly or indirectly using statements like, “My family would be better off with out me.” Sometimes they talk as if they are saying goodbye or going away.
- **Planning for suicide:** People contemplating suicide often arrange to put their affairs in order. They may give away articles they value, pay off debts or change their will.
- **Depression:** Although most depressed people are not suicidal, most suicidal people are depressed. Serious depression can be manifested in obvious sadness, but often it is expressed instead as a loss of pleasure or withdrawal from activities that had once been enjoyable.

## RECOGNIZING DEPRESSION

If your friend or loved one has a depressed mood or has lost interest or pleasure in usual activities and has at least five of the following symptoms for at least two weeks, they may be depressed:

- Change in sleeping patterns
- Change in appetite or weight
- Speaking or moving with unusual speed or slowness
- Decrease in sexual drive
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Feelings of worthlessness, self-reproach or guilt

- Diminished ability to concentrate, slowed thinking or indecisiveness
- Diminished ability to function
- Feelings of being out of control
- Speaking of death or suicide

Friends and loved ones are at heightened risk of suicide when their depression is accompanied by:

- Feelings of hopelessness and desperation
- Extreme anxiety, agitation or enraged behavior
- Severe insomnia
- Increased alcohol and/or drug use

## **TAKE IT SERIOUSLY**

- Seventy-five percent of all suicides give some warning of their intentions to a friend or family member.
- All suicide threats and attempts must be taken seriously.

## **BE WILLING TO LISTEN**

- Take the initiative to ask what is troubling them and persist to overcome any reluctance to talk about it.
- If professional help is indicated, the person you care about is more apt to follow such a recommendation if you have listened to him or her.
- If your friend or loved one is depressed, don't be afraid to ask whether he or she is considering suicide, or even if they have a particular plan or method in mind.
- Do not attempt to argue anyone out of suicide. Rather, let the person know you care and understand, that he or she is not alone, that suicidal feelings are temporary, that depression can be treated and that problems can be solved. Avoid the temptation to say, "You have so much to live for," or "Your suicide will hurt your family."

## **SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP**

- Be actively involved in encouraging the person to see a physician or mental health professional immediately. Individuals contemplating suicide often don't believe they can be helped, so you may have to do more. For example, a suicidal college student resisted seeing a psychiatrist until his roommate offered to accompany him on the visit. A 17-year-old accompanied her younger sister to a psychiatrist because her parents refused to become involved.

- You can make a difference by helping the person in need of help find a knowledgeable mental health professional or reputable treatment facility.

## **IN AN ACUTE CRISIS**

- In an acute crisis, take your friend or loved one to an emergency room or walk-in clinic at a psychiatric hospital. Do not leave them alone until help is available.
- Remove from the vicinity any firearms, drugs or sharp objects that could be used in a suicide attempt.
- Hospitalization may be indicated and may be necessary at least until the crisis abates.
- If a psychiatric facility is unavailable, go to your nearest hospital or clinic.
- If the above options are unavailable, call your local emergency number.

## **FOLLOW-UP ON TREATMENT**

- Suicidal patients are often hesitant to seek help and may run away or avoid it after an initial contact unless there is support for their continuing.
- If medication is prescribed, take an active role to make sure they are taking the medication and be sure to notify the physician about any unexpected side effects. Often, alternative medications can be prescribed.