

# Suicide Prevention

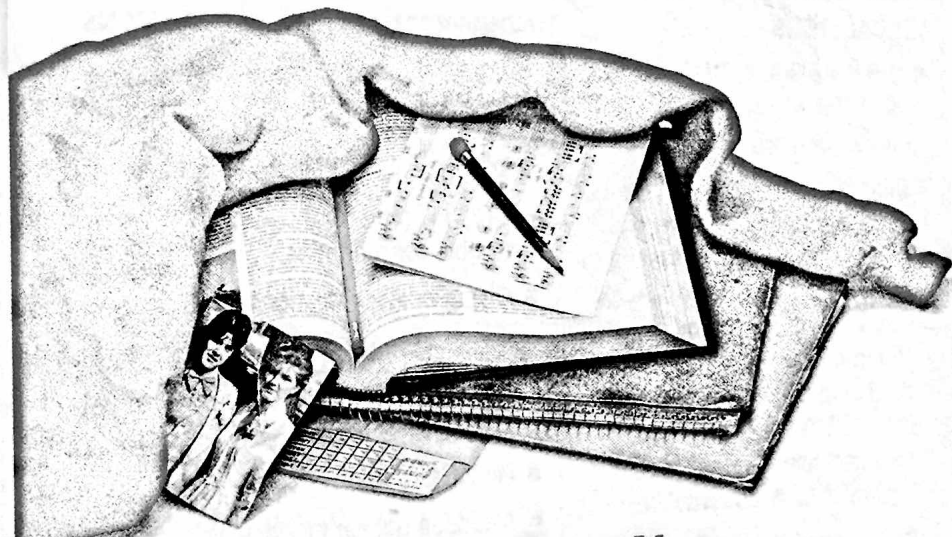
**Suicide**, the taking of one's own life, is a major health problem in the United States. Every year, some 30,000 people commit suicide. This country's rising teen suicide rate is particularly alarming and tragic, with suicide accounting for one-third of all deaths among teens. Why are these numbers so high? How can these tragic losses be stopped?

## HEALTH TERMS

**suicide**  
**depression**  
**cluster suicides**

## HEALTH CONCEPTS

- Adolescent suicide is a complex behavior that generally involves multiple risk factors, among them mental disorders and substance abuse.
- People considering suicide exhibit certain behaviors that may be seen as warning signs.



## Depression and the Teen Years

**D**o you ever feel like things are pulling you down and that you just can't cope? Most people do sometimes. Life can feel overwhelming. This is especially true during the teen years when new challenges, responsibilities, and pressures can pile up and seem overpowering. For some teens, this emotional overload can lead to **depression**, *feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and sadness*. These feelings can be further complicated by troubling life events such as the divorce or separation of parents or the loss of a loved one. Alienation—feeling isolated and separated from everyone else—can occur. When such painful feelings go unchecked over long periods, some teens may feel so filled with despair that they will try drastic, self-destructive measures to escape.

## Did You Know?

- ▶ Of the many millions of Americans who suffer from depression in any given year, 80 percent can be effectively treated, but only 30 percent seek help.
- ▶ In 1997, more teens died from suicide than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke, and chronic lung disease combined.

## Suicide Risk Factors

Suicide and suicidal behavior are not normal responses to the stresses experienced by most people. In general, youth at high risk are those who are depressed, isolated, and angry. Over 50 percent of suicidal adolescents are considered depressed. Other suicide risk factors include:

- Substance abuse, violence, or emotional, physical, or sexual abuse.
- Prior suicide attempts, firearms in the house, jail time, a family history of a mental disorder, and exposure to other suicides.

In some cases, suicide is accidental—the result of alcohol or drug abuse or the misuse of firearms.

## Suicide's Warning Signs

Recognizing the signs of suicide in one's self or others can mean the difference between life and death. Become alert and alarmed if someone you know exhibits any of the warning signs of suicide.

## Warning Signs of Suicide

### VERBAL SIGNS

- Direct statements like "I want to die," "I don't want to live anymore," or "I wish I were dead."
- Indirect statements like "I (or you) won't have to put up with this much longer," "I just want to go to sleep and never wake up," "They'll be sorry when I'm gone," "Soon this pain will be over," "I can't take it anymore," "Nothing matters," "Who cares?" "I won't be a problem for you much longer," "What's the use?"
- Poems, song lyrics, or diary entries that deal with death.

### NONVERBAL AND BEHAVIORAL SIGNS

- Depression and hopelessness.
- Lack of energy and zest for life.
- Withdrawal from family, friends, and social activities.
- Drop in grades or a poor student's new concern about grades, or trouble concentrating.
- Giving away possessions or otherwise settling affairs.
- Extreme sensitivity to what others say and do.
- Increased risk-taking and other aggressive activity, such as driving recklessly, or frequent accidents.
- Personality changes such as apathy or moodiness.
- A sudden upbeat mood, which can signal that the decision to attempt suicide has been made.
- Neglect of or dramatic change in appearance.
- Rebellious behavior or running away.
- Irrational or bizarre behavior.
- Drug and alcohol use.
- Violent actions.



# Making Responsible

## Decisions

### When a Friend Seems Troubled

Anissa has been Kelly's friend and role model for as long as Kelly can remember. Lately, though, Kelly has noticed changes. Anissa has seemed down a lot, irritable the rest of the time, and very withdrawn.



When Kelly tries to talk to her, Anissa gives abrupt answers. Anissa has also stopped

studying, has lost weight, and has dark circles under her eyes.

Kelly is worried that her friend is exhibiting warning signs of suicide but is afraid that if she approaches Anissa directly,

she might push her friend "over the edge."

### What Would You Do?

Apply the six steps of the decision-making process to Anissa's problem.

1. State the situation.
2. List the options.
3. Weigh the possible outcomes.
4. Consider your values.
5. Make a decision and act.
6. Evaluate the decision.

## Preventing Suicide

The tragic fact is that the conditions leading to suicide are almost always treatable. Most suicide thoughts are temporary, but death is permanent. With help, people suffering from depression, extreme stress, or mental disorders can often find new levels of purpose and happiness.

### Helping Others

The first thing to remember is that people who are suicidal often feel that no one cares. It is, therefore, critical to show your caring and concern. Remember, too, that the person needs professional help as soon as he or she can get it—immediately if possible. You may in fact be able to take action in time to save a life. What to do when you suspect someone you care about is a potential suicide includes the following:

- Take any and all talk of potential suicide seriously. Actively listen and show support, and be calm and understanding. Talk directly, openly, and freely. Allow the person to express his or her feelings in depth, and show **empathy** for his or her problems. Let the person know how much you and others care.
- Stress the temporary nature of the problems and feelings the person is going through, and emphasize that there is professional help available that can make things better.
- Make clear that you understand that the person wants to end his or her pain, but emphasize that suicide is not the answer. Add the



### Signs of Trouble

If you or someone you know is experiencing any or many of the following symptoms, seek help.

- feelings of sadness or anxiety that won't go away
- persistent feelings of hopelessness or emptiness
- restlessness or irritability
- lack of energy or interest
- difficulties concentrating, remembering, or thinking
- trouble making decisions
- insomnia, early waking, or oversleeping

### hot link

**empathy** For more information on empathy and its value as a positive emotion, see Chapter 8, page 199.

fact that most suicide survivors later express gratitude that they did not die.

- Ask the person whether or not he or she has a specific plan and means to follow through with it. Be sure that no weapons or drugs are available. Do not leave the potential suicidal person alone if you feel the threat is immediate. Instead, take the person to a professional for counseling.
- Suggest that he or she talk to a parent or other trusted adult, or a trained professional. Offer to make the contacts on his or her behalf.
- Do not agree to “keep a secret.”

## Multiple Suicides

Sometimes within a teen population, there are **cluster suicides**. These are *a rash of suicides occurring within a short space of time and involving several people in the same school or community*. Some cluster suicides are the result of suicide pacts—oral or written agreements between two or more people to take part in a joint suicide. When these pacts fail, as they often do, the guilt experienced by the survivor is intolerable. If you know someone engaged in such a pact, talk with a responsible adult or to the authorities immediately. Intervention must take place quickly. Counseling must start right away for all involved in such a pact.