

Suicide Prevention in Teenagers

The subject of suicide prevention among teenagers is a difficult one. The news media often bring tragic, heart-rending cases of teenage suicide to our attention and we wonder how these tragedies could have been prevented.

Because misunderstanding, or mishandling, the threat of suicide can have such a devastating outcome, it is essential for parents, and others who deal with adolescents, to understand the primary causes of teen suicide and recognize its warning signs in teenagers at risk.

While various emotional problems can predispose someone to suicide, there is a strong link between depression and suicide at any age. An estimated 15 percent with depression commit suicide, and depression is considered to be the underlying cause in half of all suicides. Because of the emotional unrest that accompanies the teenage years, suicide is an even greater risk to teens with depression. In this country, suicide is one of the leading causes of death among teenagers. Any mention of it should be taken very seriously.

What teenagers are at increased risk of suicide?

- Those teens who have a parent, friend, or acquaintance who has committed suicide
- Those teens who abuse alcohol or drugs
- Those teens who are especially self-critical, and perfectionist by nature

If you are in contact with teenagers in these categories, you should pay special attention to what they say and do that gives evidence of self-destructive behavior. If you observe some of these behaviors:

- Giving away or throwing away favorite possessions,
- Sudden cheerfulness, as though a solution to a persistent problem were in sight,
- Recent accidents or close calls,
- Specific references to suicide: "I wish I were dead" or "Nothing matters anymore."

One guideline in evaluating the seriousness of a suicide threat is how detailed and practical is the plan proposed by the teenager. The more specific the plan and the more available the means, the more quickly you need to act. Someone who tells you that, "He has saved up the sleeping pills and, when you leave for the weekend, he's going to swallow all of them" is probably at greater immediate risk than someone who remarks, in passing, that "He'd like to end it all." (continued)

Any suspicions of suicidal thought, or specific mentions of suicide, should not be ignored. Try to talk with the teenager immediately. Ask if he or she is considering suicide and discuss those behaviors or comments that have made you concerned. If you are not reassured by your conversation, call your local psychiatric hospital, mental health clinic or family physician and explain the need for an immediate evaluation for the young person. If you suspect that a suicide attempt may be imminent, don't leave the child alone.

What can you do to prevent a potential tragedy if you encounter a teenager at risk of suicide? The first step is to have the young person thoroughly evaluated by a mental health professional. Based on this evaluation, the most appropriate form of treatment can be recommended.

This public service has been brought to you by Foundations Behavioral Health.