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## Save a Friend: Tips for Teens to Prevent Suicide

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Growing up is not easy—children and teenagers face many tough decisions and difficult life experiences that, at times, seem overwhelming. For some kids, a difficult, scary or threatening situation can cause so much distress that they start to think about killing themselves. Suicide is the third leading cause of death for kids in middle and high school and it can be prevented if adults and kids are aware of the warning signs and know what to do. Especially friends, because research shows the number one person a teenager wants to talk to in times of crisis, *is another teenager*.

Although kids thinking about suicide are not likely to seek help, they do say or do something, write or draw something that comes to the attention of a friend, classmate, parent or school staff. ***Never ignore these signs. You can help!***

Some situations that might cause some kids to think about suicide include breaking up with boyfriend or girlfriend, surviving the death of a loved one, failing in school, having an argument with a parent, getting in trouble with the law and being bullied or humiliated by friends. After a tragedy such as a natural disaster, school shooting or terrorist attack in our country, some students may show warning signs of suicidal behavior. Children and youth who have experienced a personal loss, abuse, or an earlier tragic or frightening event, or who suffer from depression or other emotional problems, have a higher risk of suicide. Sometimes kids try to cope with these problems poorly, like abusing alcohol and drugs, or engaging in self injury in a very poor attempt to try to feel better. It rarely works out that way.

If you want to help prevent suicide, the first step is to learn the warning signs. Then learn the steps to take to save a friend.

### Suicide Warning Signs

- ***Suicide notes.*** These are a very real sign of danger and should be taken seriously.
- ***Plan/method/access.*** A suicidal child or adolescent may show an increased interest in guns and other weapons, may seem to have increased access to guns, pills, etc., and/or may talk about or hint at a suicide plan. The greater the planning, the greater the potential for suicide.
- ***Threats.*** Threats may be direct statements (“I want to die.” “I am going to kill myself”) or, unfortunately, indirect comments (“The world would be better without me”, “Nobody will miss me anyway”). Among teenagers, indirect clues could be offered through joking or through comments in school assignments, particularly creative writing or artwork. Younger children and those who may have some delays in their development may not be able to express their feelings in words, but may provide indirect clues in the form of acting-out, violent behavior, often with threatening or suicidal comments.
- ***Previous attempts.*** If a child or teenager has attempted suicide in the past, there is a greater likelihood that he or she will try again. Be very observant of any friends who have tried suicide before.
- ***Depression*** (helplessness/hopelessness). When symptoms of depression include strong thoughts of helplessness and hopelessness, a child or adolescent is possibly at greater risk for suicide. Watch out for behaviors or comments that indicate that your friend is feeling overwhelmed by sadness or pessimistic views of their future.

- **Masked depression.** Sometimes kids cope in very poor ways that do not look a lot like the characteristics of what we might think a depressed person looks like. Engaging in risk-taking behaviors can include acts of aggression, gunplay, and alcohol/substance abuse. While your friend does not act “depressed,” their behavior suggests that they are not concerned about their own safety. Drinking and dangerous driving is the number one killer of youth in America and the point is, it is preventable.
- **Final arrangements.** This behavior may take many forms. In adolescents, it might be giving away prized possessions such as jewelry, clothing, journals or pictures.
- **Efforts to hurt oneself.** Self-injury behaviors are warning signs for young children as well as teenagers. Common self-destructive behaviors include running into traffic, jumping from heights, and scratching/cutting/markings the body.
- **Inability to concentrate or think clearly.** Such problems may be reflected in classroom behavior, homework habits, academic performance, household chores, even conversation. If your friend starts skipping classes, getting poor grades, acting up in class, forgetting or poorly performing chores around the house or talking in a way that suggests they are having trouble concentrating, these might be signs of stress and risk for suicide.
- **Changes in physical habits and appearance.** Changes include inability to sleep or sleeping all the time, sudden weight gain or loss, disinterest in appearance or hygiene.
- **Sudden changes in personality, friends, and behaviors.** Parents, teachers and friends are often the best observers of sudden changes in suicidal students. Changes can include withdrawing from friends and family, skipping school or classes, loss of involvement in activities that were once important, and avoiding friends.
- **Death and suicidal themes.** These might appear in classroom drawings, work samples, journals or homework.

### What Can You Do to Help a Friend?

- **Know the warning signs!** Read over the list above and keep it in a safe place.
- **Do not be afraid to talk to your friends.** Listen to their feelings. Make sure they know how important they are to you, but don’t believe you can keep them from hurting themselves on your own. Preventing suicide will require adult help.
- **Make no deals.** Never keep secret a friend’s suicidal plans or thoughts. You can not promise that you will not tell—you have to tell to save your friend!
- **Tell an adult.** Talk to your parent, your friend’s parent, your school’s psychologist or counselor--a trusted adult. And don’t wait! Don’t be afraid that the adults will not believe you or take you seriously—keep talking until they listen! Even if you are not sure your friend is suicidal, talk to someone. It’s OK if you “jump the gun”—this is definitely the time to be safe and not sorry!
- **Ask if your school has a crisis team.** Many schools (elementary, middle and high schools) have organized crisis teams, which include teachers, counselors, social workers, psychologists and principals. These teams help train all staff to recognize warning signs of suicide as well as how to help in a crisis situation. These teams can also help students understand warning signs of violence and suicide. If your school does not have a crisis team, ask your Student Council or faculty advisor to look into starting one. If it has a team, then look into joining it!

### Resources

National Association of School Psychologists— [www.nasponline.org/NEAT/crisismain.html](http://www.nasponline.org/NEAT/crisismain.html)

Suicide Prevention Resource Center---[www.sprc.org](http://www.sprc.org)

Signs of Suicide: SOS High School Suicide Intervention Program—[www.mentalhealthscreening.org](http://www.mentalhealthscreening.org)

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