

Life Connections

Mental Health & Behavioral Health Services

Growing up is not easy! For some, a difficult, scary or threatening situation can cause so much distress that they start to think about killing themselves. Suicide is one of the leading causes of death for kids in middle school and high school and it can be prevented if adults and friends are aware of the warning signs and know what to do. Below are warning signs to learn and be aware of in addition to steps children and parents can take if faced with a suicidal classmate, friend, or family member. Always remember, you are NOT alone in keeping your friends and loved ones safe.

Suicide Warning Signs:

1. Suicide notes. These are a very real sign of danger and should be taken seriously.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. “Masked” depression. Sometimes 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.
6. Final arrangements. This behavior may take many forms. In adolescents, it might be giving away prized possessions such as jewelry, clothing, journals or pictures.
7. 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.
8. 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.
9. 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.

Life Connections

Mental Health & Behavioral Health Services

10. Sudden changes in personality, friends, 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.
11. Death and suicidal themes. These might appear in classroom drawings, work samples, journals or homework.
12. 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.

Important steps parents can take:

1. Reassure your child they did the right thing coming to an adult for help. It is difficult for a child to talk to an adult about a friend's suicidal thinking and can be scary for the child.
2. Ask for details: What happened? What did your friend say?
3. Reach out the friend's family if you feel comfortable doing so.
4. Get emergency help to check in on the student.
5. Help your own child: They may be feeling overwhelmed by fear of what is going on with their friend. Help support them through this time. Encourage open conversation about mental health.

What Can You Do to Help a Friend?

1. Know the warning signs! Read over the list above and keep it in a safe place.
2. 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.
3. Make no deals. Never keep a secret for a friend's suicidal plans or thoughts. You can not promise that you will not tell— you have to tell to save your friend!
4. Tell an adult. Talk to your parents, your friend's parents, 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—this is definitely the time to be safe and not sorry!

5. Use Crisis Line Resources:

Emergency Services

911

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-8255

Foundation 2 Mobile Crisis Services

1-800-332-4224

Crisis Text Line

Text HOME to 741741