

Suicide Prevention

What is the issue?

Suicide rarely happens without some warning. Learning how to recognise the signs and take them seriously can help.

Be willing to listen and ask questions about needs and concerns. Encourage distressed young people to seek help as soon as possible. Offer to take them to appointments and stay with them if necessary. Many young people think they can't be helped and that their problems can't be solved, however, counselling can help them to see solutions to their problems.

It is important to take suicide threats seriously. Do not assume the situation will get better by itself. Young people can be helped. Sometimes a young person may tell you their suicide plans in confidence, however, their life is more important than keeping a secret. Getting professional help may save a life.

Although it is common for young people to be defensive and resist help, most are relieved when someone expresses genuine concern. Support and constructive assistance can come from many sources. Assistance from professionals is much more effective if a network of support is also available from family and friends.

Young people can be helped and suicide may be prevented.
Most young people are relieved to have someone intervene.

Suicide and the mental health of young people

Most young people who attempt suicide have mental health problems, especially depression. While all of us feel sad or unhappy at some time, when young people are depressed they may feel hopeless or overwhelmed by despair.

Young people who are depressed may feel like they are "losers" and have little confidence. They may see themselves as powerless and unable to improve their situation. However, depression can be treated and most get better within a year.

Not all young people with depression are suicidal, and not all adolescents who attempt suicide are depressed. However, if young people are depressed they should be assessed for suicide risk.

Young people with mental health problems may be more vulnerable to stresses such as:

- Loss of an important person through death or separation.
- Recent suicide of a friend or relative.
- Recent break up with girlfriend or boyfriend.
- Trouble with school or the police.
- Feared or confirmed pregnancy.
- Being a victim of sexual or other abuse (now or in the past).
- Family conflict or domestic violence.

Misuse of alcohol or other drugs can increase the risk of self harm including suicide.

Suicide may take one life, but it affects whole communities. It is a human tragedy, especially when it involves the lives of young people. As many as 90 per cent of young people who attempt suicide have a mental health problem at the time. This includes depression, hazardous use of alcohol and other drugs and behavioural problems.

What are the warning signs

Many factors are linked to youth suicide. Although it is not possible to prevent every suicide, knowing about some of the warning signs may help people intervene sooner. These include:

- Expressing feelings of hopelessness.
- Decline in school work and attendance.
- Death or suicide themes dominating written or creative work.
- Giving away personal possessions.
- Statements showing suicidal ideas or thoughts about death such as "I wish I was dead", "no one cares if I live or die", "does it hurt to die?".
- Feelings of worthlessness, letting parents or others down.
- Withdrawal from friends.

What can parents do to help?

Adolescence is a difficult time, bridging childhood and adulthood. Parents may feel frustrated by challenges to their ideas and attitudes. Although parents may have difficulty in talking with young people about personal issues, good communication is important in understanding what they are feeling and thinking.

- Be honest about your concerns and feelings and try to discuss them calmly.
- Allow the young person time to talk about their situation and feelings. If possible arrange for a time and place free of interruptions.
- Try and be as non-judgmental as possible. Avoid offering too much advice.
- Do not trivialise the concerns of the

young person. Their perspective may be very different.

- Be prepared to ask if they are thinking about hurting themselves.
- Take any talk of self harm or suicide seriously. Suggest that the young person receives assistance as soon as possible.
- Be prepared to help them make and keep contact with professional assistance.
- Do not promise to keep secret any threat of self harm.
- Stay with the young person if you think there is an immediate risk of self harm.
- Convey a message of hope and support.
- Presenting alternatives to suicide and affirming the worth of a young person can assist them to feel less alone and hopeless.

Where to get help:

In an emergency contact your:

general practitioner or
local hospital **Emergency Department**

If you would like more information about mental health and services contact:

NSW Association for Mental Health, Mental Health Information Service

Monday to Friday, 12.30pm - 4.30pm

Phone: (02) 9816 5688

Rural areas: 1800 674 200

For other help, the first point of contact can be:

- Your local Area Health Service (during business hours) including community health centres or specialist child and adolescent mental health services
- Other specialists who work with children and adolescents such as paediatricians and child psychologists.

24 hour telephone services are:

Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800
Lifeline 131 114