

Identifying risk factors and warning signs for suicide



Suicide is rarely the result of a single event or factor. It is usually a result of a person feeling hopeless about life due to a combination of biological, psychological and environmental factors.

Most people with suicidal thoughts do not actually want to die. However, they often can't see a way out of the problems they are facing and view suicide as their only option. Appropriate assistance can help them to find answers to the problems they're struggling with and give them a sense of hope for the future.

While we can never be sure who or why someone will attempt to end their own life, knowing the risk factors and warning signs can help us to identify and assist those young people who are most vulnerable.

Risk factors for suicide

Research shows that a wide range of biological, psychological and social factors are associated with an increased risk of suicide. Risk factors can be things that can change (such as substance abuse) or things that cannot change (a family history of suicide).

Risk factors include:

- Experiencing mental health and/or drug and alcohol problems
- A past suicide attempt
- Experiencing family difficulties or violence, or family history of suicide
- Loss of a friend or family member
- Social and geographical isolation
- Being male; males have a statistically higher risk than females.

The presence of mental illness is one of the strongest risk factors for suicide¹. Studies indicate that between 70 and 91 per cent of young people who attempt suicide or report suicidal thoughts have a mental illness².

Depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder and substance abuse are all associated with

suicide in young people. These illnesses can cause changes in a young person's thinking, behaviour and coping. They can also increase a young person's feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. This can then lead to thoughts of suicide.

Experiencing risk factors does not necessarily mean a person has had – or will ever have – suicidal thoughts but knowing whether a young person has any of these risk factors can help identify vulnerable young people. Suicidal thoughts and actions are often associated with a young person's past and current experiences, level of social connectedness, coping style and trigger events, such as a relationship break-up or the death of a loved one.

Stressful life events can trigger suicidal thoughts and actions in young people who already have increased risk. Some young people however will develop suicidal thoughts without having a history of any risk factors. It's important to keep in mind that while most young people cope well with stressful or traumatic events in their lives and do not become suicidal, watching out for common warning signs can help us to identify those that may not be coping so well.

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Warning signs of suicide

Warning signs are the behaviours and noticeable changes that may indicate that a young person is thinking about or planning suicide. Knowing the warning signs for suicide can help us to recognise those at risk. The greater the number of risk factors and warning signs, the more likely the young person is at risk of attempting suicide.

It is not uncommon for young people to display one or more of these behaviours at various times, especially in times of stress. However it is always best to act safely and to talk to the young person as soon as possible about what is going on for them and whether they are having thoughts of suicide.

Behaviours which may indicate that a young person is at imminent risk of suicide include:

- Threatening to hurt or kill themselves
- Planning ways to kill themselves and/ or trying to access the means to kill themselves
- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide
- Expressing feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness, that life is not worth living
- Engaging in reckless or risky behaviour without concern for their safety
- Talking or writing about being a burden to others

- Increasing their use of drugs or alcohol
- Withdrawing from friends, teachers and family
- Noticeable changes in mood including increased levels of anger or agitation
- Taking less care in their appearance (not washing, appearing dishevelled, etc.)
- Giving away possessions
- Saying goodbye to loved ones.

Suicide contagion

Suicide contagion refers to the process whereby one suicide or suicidal act within a school, community or geographic area increases the likelihood that others will attempt suicide. **See headspace School Support fact sheet *Suicide Contagion* for more information on those at risk.**

Responding to warning signs

If you are concerned that a young person might be having suicidal thoughts or planning to take their life it is important to take what they say seriously and act immediately. Ask them directly about whether they are having thoughts of suicide and if they have a plan for how they will do it. This will not “put thoughts into their head” and is vitally important in assessing their risk of suicide.

If you believe that a young person is at immediate or high risk of attempting suicide, you or an appropriate staff member, should:

- Stay with them (or arrange for supervision) until they can be seen and assessed
- Contact their parent or guardian as soon as possible
- Remove access to methods of suicide or harm (such as sharp objects, medications, alcohol or drugs)
- Contact an appropriate local mental health service, call 000 or take them to the emergency department.

Seek further information

Suicide is a complex issue. This fact sheet conveys some important information for identifying risk and warning signs for suicide but is not intended to replace effective training or professional consultation. To ensure a safe response to suicide risk, seek professional support and further training.

Consider marginalised young people

When thinking about issues related to youth suicide it is very important to be aware of the unique needs of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) or Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Intersex (LGBTI) young people and respond appropriately. Please see the **headspace School Support** website for more information.

Please refer to the **headspace School Support *Suicide Postvention Toolkit – A Guide for Secondary Schools*** for further guidance.

For more information on suicide or support and assistance visit headspace.org.au/schoolsupport or headspace.org.au

Acknowledgements – American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Centre. (2011). *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*, Newton, MA: Education Development Centre, Inc. | Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. (2011). *LIFE Fact Sheets*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, accessed at www.livingisforeveryone.com.au. | Mental Health First Aid Training and Research Program. (2008). *Suicidal thoughts and behaviours: first aid guidelines*. Melbourne: Orygen Youth Health Research Centre, University of Melbourne | South Australia Department of Education and Children's Services, Catholic Education South Australia and Association of Independent Schools. (2010). *Suicide Postvention Guidelines: a framework to assist staff in supporting their school communities in responding to suspected, attempted or completed suicide*. South Australia: Government of South Australia, Department of Education and Children's Services.

References

- ¹Harris, E.C., Barraclough, B., 1997. Suicide as an outcome for mental disorders. A meta-analysis. *Br. J. Psychiatry* 170, 205-228
²Gould, M.S., King, R., Greenwald, S., Fisher, P., Schwab-Stone, M., Kramer, R., Flisher, A.J., Goodman, S., Canino, G. & Shaffer, D: Psychopathology associated with suicidal ideation and attempts among children and adolescents. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 1998 Sep;37(9):915-23.

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