

About Teen Suicide

When a teen commits suicide, everyone is affected. Family members, friends, teammates, neighbors, and sometimes even those who didn't know the teen well might experience feelings of grief, confusion, guilt — and the sense that if only they had done something differently, the suicide could have been prevented.

So it's important to understand the forces that can lead teens to suicide and to know how to help.

About Teen Suicide

The reasons behind a teen's suicide or attempted suicide can be complex. Although suicide is relatively rare among children, the rate of suicides and suicide attempts increases tremendously during adolescence. Suicide is the third-leading cause of death for 15- to 24-year-olds, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), surpassed only by accidents and homicide.

The risk of suicide increases dramatically when kids and teens have access to firearms at home, and nearly 60% of all suicides in the United States are committed with a gun. That's why any gun in your home should be unloaded, locked, and kept out of the reach of children and teens. Ammunition should be stored and locked apart from the gun, and the keys for both should be kept in a different area from where you store your household keys. Always keep the keys to any firearms out of the reach of children and adolescents.

Suicide rates differ between boys and girls. Girls think about and attempt suicide about twice as often as boys, and tend to attempt suicide by overdosing on drugs or cutting themselves. Yet boys die by suicide about four times as often girls, perhaps because they tend to use more lethal methods, such as firearms, hanging, or jumping from heights.

Which Kids Are at Risk for Suicide?

It can be hard to remember how it felt to be a teen, caught in that gray area between childhood and adulthood. Sure, it's a time of tremendous possibility but it can also be a period of great confusion and anxiety. There's pressure to fit in socially, to perform academically, and to act responsibly. There's the awakening of sexual feelings, a growing self-identity, and a need for autonomy that often conflicts with the rules and expectations set by others.

A teen with an adequate support network of friends, family, religious affiliations, peer groups, or extracurricular activities may have an outlet to deal with everyday frustrations. But many teens don't believe they have that, and feel disconnected and isolated from family and friends. These teens are at increased risk for suicide.

Factors that increase the risk of suicide among teens include:

- a psychological disorder, especially depression, bipolar disorder, and alcohol and drug use (in fact, approximately 95% of people who die by suicide have a psychological disorder at the time of death)
- feelings of distress, irritability, or agitation

- feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness that often accompany depression (a teen, for example, who experiences repeated failures at school, who is overwhelmed by violence at home, or who is isolated from peers is likely to experience such feelings)
- a previous suicide attempt
- a family history of depression or suicide (depressive illnesses may have a genetic component, so some teens may be predisposed to suffer major depression)
- physical or sexual abuse
- lack of a support network, poor relationships with parents or peers, and feelings of social isolation
- dealing with homosexuality in an unsupportive family or community or hostile school environment

Warning Signs

Suicide among teens often occurs following a stressful life event, such as a perceived failure at school, a breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend, the death of a loved one, a divorce, or a major family conflict.

A teen who is thinking about suicide might:

- talk about suicide or death in general
- talk about "going away"
- talk about feeling hopeless or feeling guilty
- pull away from friends or family
- lose the desire to take part in favorite things or activities
- have trouble concentrating or thinking clearly
- experience changes in eating or sleeping habits
- self-destructive behavior (drinking alcohol, taking drugs, or driving too fast, for example)

What Can Parents Do?

Most teens who commit or attempt suicide have given some type of warning to loved ones ahead of time. So it's important for parents to know the warning signs so that kids who might be suicidal can get the help they need.

Watch and Listen

Keep a close eye on a teen who seems depressed and withdrawn. Poor grades, for example, may signal that your teen is withdrawing at school.

It's important to keep the lines of communication open and express your concern, support, and love. If your teen confides in you, show that you take those concerns seriously. A fight with a friend might not seem like a big deal to you in the larger scheme of things, but for a teen it can feel immense and consuming. It's important not to minimize or discount what your teen is going through, as this can increase his or her sense of hopelessness.

If your teen doesn't feel comfortable talking with you, suggest a more neutral person, such as another relative, a clergy member, a coach, a school counselor, or your child's doctor.

Ask Questions

Some parents are reluctant to ask teens if they have been thinking about suicide or hurting themselves. Some fear that by asking, they will plant the idea of suicide in their teen's head.

It's always a good idea to ask, even though doing so can be difficult. Sometimes it helps to explain why you're asking. For instance, you might say: "I've noticed that you've been talking a lot about wanting to be dead. Have you been having thoughts about trying to kill yourself?"

Get Help

If you learn that your child is thinking about suicide, get help immediately. Your doctor can refer you to a psychologist or psychiatrist, or your local hospital's department of psychiatry can provide a list of doctors in your area. Your local mental health association or county medical society can also provide references. In an emergency, you can call **(800) SUICIDE** or **(800) 999-9999**.

If your teen is in a crisis situation, your local emergency room can conduct a comprehensive psychiatric evaluation and refer you to the appropriate resources. If you're unsure about whether you should bring your child to the emergency room, contact your doctor or call (800) SUICIDE for help.

If you've scheduled an appointment with a mental health professional, make sure to keep the appointment, even if your teen says he or she is feeling better. Suicidal thoughts do tend to come and go; however, it is important that your teen get help developing the skills necessary to decrease the likelihood that suicidal thoughts and behaviors will emerge again if a crisis arises.

If your teen refuses to go to the appointment, discuss this with the mental health professional — and consider attending the session and working with the clinician to make sure your teen has access to the help needed. The clinician might also be able to help you devise strategies to help your teen want to get help.

Remember that any ongoing conflicts between a parent and child can fuel the fire for a teen who is feeling isolated, misunderstood, devalued, or suicidal. Get help to air family problems and resolve them in a constructive way. Also let the mental health professional know if there is a history of depression, substance abuse, family violence, or other stresses at home, such as an ongoing environment of criticism.

Helping Teens Cope With Loss

What should you do if someone your teen knows, perhaps a friend or a classmate, has attempted or committed suicide? First, acknowledge your child's many emotions. Some teens say they feel guilty — especially those who felt they could have interpreted their friend's actions and words better.

Others say they feel angry with the person who committed or attempted suicide for having done something so selfish. Still others say they feel no strong emotions. All of these reactions are appropriate; emphasize to your teen that there is no right or wrong way to feel.

When someone attempts suicide and survives, people may be afraid of or uncomfortable about talking with him or her about it. Tell your teen to resist this urge; this is a time when a person absolutely needs to feel connected to others.

Many schools address a student's suicide by calling in special counselors to talk with the students and help them cope. If your teen is dealing with a friend or classmate's suicide, encourage him or her to make use of these resources or to talk to you or another trusted adult.

If You've Lost a Child to Suicide

For parents, the death of a child is among the most painful losses imaginable. For parents who've lost a child to suicide, the pain and grief may be intensified. Although these feelings may never completely go away, survivors of suicide can take steps to begin the healing process:

Maintain contact with others. Suicide can be a very isolating experience for surviving family members because friends often don't know what to say or how to help. Seek out supportive people to talk with about your child and your feelings. If those around you seem uncomfortable about reaching out, initiate the conversation and ask for their help.

Remember that your other family members are grieving, too, and that everyone expresses grief in their own way. Your other children, in particular, may try to deal with their pain alone so as not to burden you with additional worries. Be there for each other through the tears, anger, and silences — and, if necessary, seek help and support together.

Expect that anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays may be difficult. Important days and holidays often reawaken a sense of loss and anxiety. On those days, do what's best for your emotional needs, whether that means surrounding yourself with family and friends or planning a quiet day of reflection.

Understand that it's normal to feel guilty and to question how this could have happened, but it's also important to realize that you might never get the answers you seek. The healing that takes place over time comes from reaching a point of forgiveness — for both your child and yourself.

Counseling and support groups can play a tremendous role in helping you to realize you are not alone.

Reviewed by: Matthew K. Nock, PhD

Date reviewed: June 2008

Note: All information on KidsHealth® is for educational purposes only. For specific medical advice, diagnoses, and treatment, consult your doctor.

This information was provided by KidsHealth, one of the largest resources online for medically reviewed health information written for parents, kids, and teens. For more articles like this, visit KidsHealth.org or TeensHealth.org. © 1995- 2010. The Nemours Foundation/KidsHealth. All rights reserved.