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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 like the 9/11 terrorist attacks 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.

Although kids thinking about suicide are not likely to seek help, they do show warning signs to their friends, classmates, parents or trusted school personnel. *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, failing in school, problems with parents, and rejection by friends. After a disaster such as a school shooting or terrorist attack in our country, some students may display 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. Youngsters who have these risk factors *and* who have been directly affected by or witnessed a traumatic event are most likely to consider suicide.

Warning signs may not appear right away following the event. Parents, teachers, and friends must be good listeners and observers over the weeks to come. Below are some tips to help prevent suicide and get help.

## Suicide Warning Signs

- **Suicide notes:** These are a very real sign of danger and should be taken seriously.
- **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, and 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 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 the future.
- **“Masked” depression:** Sometimes risk-taking behaviors can include acts of aggression, gunplay, and alcohol/substance abuse. While some teens do not act depressed, their behavior suggests that they are not concerned about their own safety.
- **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/marking the body.
- **Inability to concentrate or think clearly:** These 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 he or she is 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, and 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.
- *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 or pills, and may talk about or hint at a suicide plan. The greater the planning, the greater the potential for suicide.

## What You Can 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 do not 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 cannot promise that you will not tell. You have to tell to save your friend.
- *Tell an adult:* Talk to a trusted adult such as your parent, your friend's parent, even your school's psychologist or counselor. 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 is 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 and middle and high schools) have organized crisis teams, which include teachers, counselors, social workers, psychologists, and principals. These teams help train 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 a team.

## Resources

- Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Families—  
[www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)
- National Association of School Psychologists—  
[www.nasponline.org/NEAT/crisismain.html](http://www.nasponline.org/NEAT/crisismain.html)
- SOS High School Suicide Intervention Program—  
[www.mentalhealthscreening.org](http://www.mentalhealthscreening.org)

*Adapted from A National Tragedy: Preventing Suicide in Troubled Children and Youth, available on the National Association of School Psychologists website at [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org).*

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