

Youth suicide - the warning signs

In Victoria, more than 500 deaths per year are caused by suicide. The highest number of suicides occurs among males aged 25 to 34 years. Suicide occurs across all socioeconomic levels. Suicide can be an impulsive act or a well-thought-out plan. All people – not just mental health professionals – can help young people experiencing suicidal thoughts by providing emotional and practical support.

Warning signs of suicide

Predicting suicide is difficult. Changes in behaviour outside the person's normal range of behaviour, and which do not make sense to those close to them, may be a warning sign.

Other warning signs may include:

- Loss of interest in previously pleasurable activities
- Giving away prized possessions
- Problem behaviour and substance misuse
- Apathy in dress and appearance, or a sudden change in weight
- Sudden and striking personality changes
- Withdrawal from friends and social activities
- Increased 'accident proneness' and self-harming behaviours.

Most young people who complete suicide told someone of their plans

About 80 per cent of young people who complete suicide told someone they intended to kill themselves.

Triggers of suicide

Stress can contribute to suicide. A young person may experience an overwhelming and immediate stress, or stress that builds up over a long time.

Stressful experiences that may contribute or trigger suicide include:

- Loss of an important person through death or divorce
- Incest or child abuse
- Bullying at school or workplace
- A sense of failure at school
- A sense of failure in relationships
- Breaking up with a girlfriend or boyfriend
- Experiencing discrimination, isolation and relationship conflicts with family, friends and others because the young person is gay or lesbian
- The recent suicide of a friend or relative, or an anniversary of a suicide or the death of someone close to them.

People who have attempted suicide before are very likely to try again. Those who have a history of harming themselves deliberately are also at higher risk of suicide.

Helping a young person experiencing suicidal thoughts

You may be able to help a young person if you:

- Listen and encourage them to talk, and show that you are taking their concern seriously
- Tell the person you care
- Acknowledge their fears, despair or sadness
- Provide reassurance, but do not dismiss the problem
- Ask if they are thinking of hurting or killing themselves, and if they have a plan
- Point out the consequences of suicide for the person and those they leave behind
- Ensure they do not have access to lethal weapons or medications
- Stay with the person if they are at high risk
- Immediately tell someone else, preferably an adult
- Get help from professionals, offer to go with them to provide support
- Let them know where they can get other help
- Provide contact numbers and assist them to ring if necessary.

What is not helpful

Try to avoid:

- Interrupting with stories of your own
- Panicking or becoming angry
- Being judgmental
- Offering too much advice.

Suicide myths

Incorrect beliefs concerning suicide include:

Myth	Fact
<i>Young people who talk about suicide never attempt or complete it. They are just seeking attention.</i>	It is more likely a cry for help and should always be taken seriously.
<i>Once a person is intent on suicide, there is no way to stop them. They will be suicidal forever.</i>	Suicide can be preventable. If they receive the help they seek, they are less likely to attempt suicide.
<i>Suicide is hereditary.</i>	While suicide tends to run in families, it is not hereditary. It is important for suicidal people to know there are options other than ending their life.
<i>All suicidal young people are depressed.</i>	While depressed mood is common, this is not true for everyone who suicides.
<i>A marked and sudden improvement in mental state following a crisis indicates the suicide risk is over.</i>	When there have been signs of a possible suicide attempt, a sudden improvement in mood may in fact indicate that the person has finally decided to take their own life.

Where to get help

- Your local community health centre
- A doctor (not necessarily the family doctor)
- SuicideLine Tel. 1300 651 251
- Kids Helpline Freecall Tel. 1800 551 800
- Other telephone counselling, information and referral services, such as Lifeline Tel.13 11 14

Things to remember

- You don't have to be a trained professional to help a young person experiencing suicidal thoughts.
- Take all suicide threats seriously.

- You can help by offering emotional and practical support, by listening and by helping to link the person with professional help.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Department of Health - Victoria's Mental Health Services

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