

## Preventing Suicide

Suicide. We would rather not talk about it. We hope it will never happen to anyone we know. But suicide is a reality, and it is more common than you might think. The possibility that suicide could claim the life of someone you love cannot be ignored. By paying attention to warning signs and talking about the "unthinkable", you may be able to prevent a death.

### Who is at risk?

People likely to commit suicide include those who:

- Are having a serious physical or mental illness,
- Are abusing alcohol or drugs,
- Are experiencing a major loss, such as the death of a loved one, unemployment or divorce,
- Are experiencing major changes in their life, such as teenagers and seniors,
- Have made previous suicide threats.

### Why do people commit suicide?

There are many circumstances which can contribute to someone's decision to end his or her life, but a person's feelings about those circumstances are more important than the circumstances themselves. All people who consider suicide feel that life is unbearable. They have an extreme sense of hopelessness, helplessness, and desperation. With some types of mental illness, people may hear voices or have delusions which prompt them to kill themselves.

People who talk about committing suicide or make an attempt do not necessarily want to die. Often, they are reaching out for help. Sometimes, a suicide attempt becomes the turning point in a person's life if there is enough support to help the person make necessary changes.

If someone you know is feeling desperate enough to commit suicide, you may be able to help him or her find a better way to cope. If you yourself are so distressed that you cannot think of any way out except by "ending it all", remember, help for your problems is available.

### What are the danger signs?

Some warning signs that a person may be suicidal include:

- Repeated expressions of hopelessness, helplessness, or desperation,
- Behaviour that is out of character, such as recklessness in someone who is normally careful,
- Signs of depression - sleeplessness, social withdrawal, loss of appetite, loss of interest in usual activities,
- A sudden and unexpected change to a cheerful attitude,
- Giving away prized possessions to friends and family,

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- Making a will, taking out insurance, or other preparations for death, such as telling final wishes to someone close,
- Making remarks related to death and dying, or an expressed intent to commit suicide. An expressed intent to commit suicide should always be taken very seriously.

### **Prevent a suicide attempt**

If you are concerned that someone may be suicidal, take action. If possible, talk with the person directly. The single-most important thing you can do is listen attentively without judgement.

Talking about suicide can only decrease the likelihood that someone will act on suicidal feelings. There is almost no risk that raising the topic with someone who is not considering suicide will prompt him or her to do it.

Find a safe place to talk with the person, and allow as much time as necessary. Assure the person of your concern and your respect for his or her privacy. Ask the person about recent events, and encourage the person to express his or her feelings freely. Do not minimize the feelings involved.

Ask whether the person feels desperate enough to consider suicide. If the answer is yes, ask, "Do you have a plan? How and where do you intend to kill yourself?" Admit your own concern and fear if the person tells you that he or she is thinking about suicide but do not react by saying, "You should not be having these thoughts; things cannot be that bad." Remember, you are being trusted with someone's deepest feelings. Although it may upset you, talking about those feelings will bring the person relief.

Ask if there is anything you can do. Talk about resources that can be drawn on (family, friends, community agencies, crisis centres) to provide support, practical assistance, counselling or treatment.

Make a plan with the person for the next few hours or days. Make contacts with the person or on his or her behalf. If possible, go with the person to get help.

Let the person know when you can be available, and then make sure you are available at those times. Also, make sure your limits are known, and try to arrange that there is always someone that the person can call at any time of day.

Ask who else knows about the suicidal feelings. Are there other people who should know? Is the person willing to tell them? Unfortunately, not everyone will treat this issue sensitively. Confidentiality is important, but do not keep the situation secret if a life is clearly in danger.

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