

Preventing Youth Suicide

Suicide among 15 to 24-year-old people is a serious problem in Canada. Adolescence can be a time of confusion and stress. Although most young people survive these years without major problems, others feel so helpless and without hope that they kill themselves. The reasons young people commit suicide vary, but common risk factors are:

- Having already made one suicide attempt, or more.
- If they are very depressed. Mood swings are normal for teenagers, but signs that someone is very depressed could include being depressed for a long time, losing interest in daily activities, withdrawing from friends, loss of energy and motivation, not enjoying things any more, feeling bad about themselves, sudden weight changes and changes in sleeping patterns.
- If their behaviour is extremely angry, destructive and impulsive or they abuse alcohol or drugs.
- If there are serious family problems, for example a violent, abusive family, an unsupportive family, or a family that is over-protective and restrictive.
- Relationship conflicts with friends or family. These are normal in adolescence, but can be serious when they persist.
- Other risk factors include mental illness such as severe depression or schizophrenia, chronic unemployment, bereavement, sexual abuse, failure at school, or concerns about sexuality. Young people who think they may be homosexual, for instance, may feel very alone because they are afraid to talk to anyone about this issue. Or they may be bullied or teased because of their sexuality.
- Young people who have experienced war, persecution, or trauma before coming to Canada may experience depression and feelings of hopelessness.

Factors that make young people less likely to commit suicide include: having a supportive person in their life - a parent, teacher, close friend or youth worker, for example; being able to cope with problems - a young person who is resourceful and able to cope with stressful situations will cope better with life's difficulties; having a supportive, caring family. Families which offer good communication, stability and guidance are important for young people.

How can parents help prevent youth suicide?

- Build a good relationship with teenagers. Ways to do this include spending time with them doing things you all enjoy; being supportive without intruding on their

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privacy. Be sympathetic if they are upset, for example, but accept that they may not want to tell you all the details of their problems.

- Listen to what teenagers have to say. Young people often complain that parents are quick to give advice, but do not listen to their point of view.
- Be supportive in stressful situations like family break-ups, problems with friends, trouble with the police, important exams, problems or disappointments at school or with employment. (School counsellors may be available to help young people and their families if there are problems.)
- Get help if you suspect a young person may have a mental illness. Many mental illnesses begin in adolescence. Early detection means they can be treated more successfully.
- Take a suicide threat seriously. It is a cry for help, rather than a sign that someone intends to commit suicide right now. But do not take chances.

Some families and communities may find it hard to talk about issues like suicide, or about any difficulties they may have experienced in the past. But keeping these feelings inside can make things worse. Talking to someone who is specially trained to help with these issues, however, can be the first step to resolving problems and dealing with the pain.

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