

Suicide Solutions ■

If a person is *really* determined to die, he or she can usually figure out a way, no matter what anyone does. As painful as that may be, we need to accept it. Still, many young people who consider—or even attempt—suicide aren't *that* determined to kill themselves. And there are a lot of things we can all do to make suicide more difficult and less likely.

Since about half of all young people who kill themselves do it with guns kept at home, one solution is for parents to keep guns hidden and unloaded, with bullets stored separately. Researchers say that suicidal impulses usually last only about 15 minutes. Making it past that time may be enough to defuse the situation.



If you're a young person and a friend mentions suicide, talk to an adult—a parent, counselor, or someone else you can trust—as soon as you can.

If you prevent a friend from committing suicide, he or she *may* be upset for a while, but probably not for long. At least they'll have a lifetime to change their mind. ■

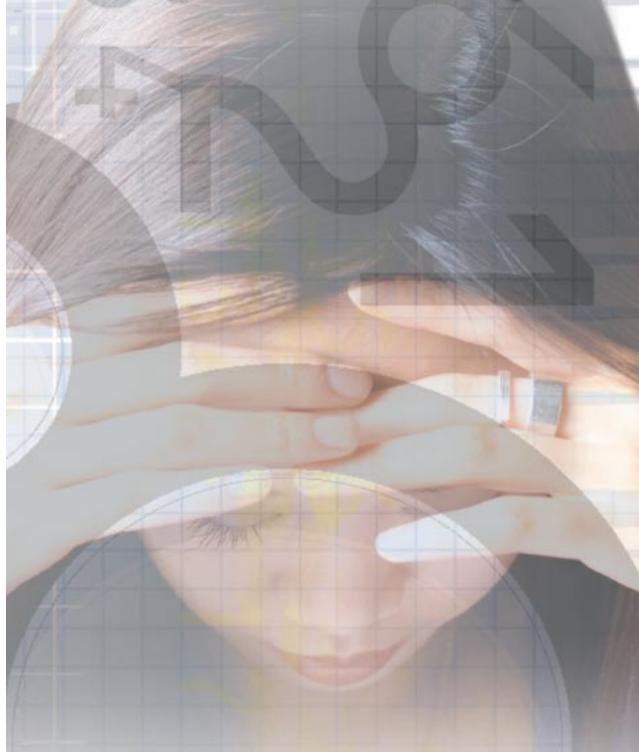


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Teen & Young Adult Suicide



Light & Shadows

► A Do It Now Foundation Publication by Nancy Merritt

Life Lines ■

to be or not to be?

It's a question that's thundered throughout history and one that pulses inside each of us, at one time or another in our lives.

Still, never has its pulse been more profound or its pull more compelling than for young people in America today.

Just consider some numbers. They're taken from recent surveys of college and high school students by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control:

► 27 percent of high-school students said they'd "thought seriously" about suicide in the past year; 8 percent said they'd actually tried to kill themselves.

► 10.3 percent of U.S. college students admitted serious thoughts of suicide; 6.7 percent had a suicide plan.

And today's teen-and-young-adult suicide epidemic isn't just a statistical blip, either, or a case of media hype. The number of both suicide attempts and fatalities rose steadily in the 1990's, following similar jumps in the 1960's, '70s, and '80s.

Today, an estimated 276,000 kids between the ages of 14 and 17 try killing themselves each year, and more than 5,000 succeed. The current rate is four times that of 1950.

The numbers are disturbing, and yet they only partially convey the tragedy of teen and young adult suicide, since every victim leaves a hole in the fabric of their communities and schools, and an ongoing ache in the hearts of their families and friends.

The epidemic is cause for concern—and for a new commitment to ending its spread. Because the real tragedy of youthful suicide is that it often can be prevented, *if* we know what to look for and care enough to act.

That's the point of this pamphlet.

Because stopping suicide starts with understanding the pain that suicidal people feel and helping them understand that they're not alone.



Stress factors. Suicide by young people is often linked to anxiety, depression, and impulsiveness.



Some 276,000 kids between the Sages of 14 and 17 attempt suicide every year, and more than 5,000 succeed.



■ What types of people are most likely to attempt suicide?

At one time or another, just about everyone thinks of suicide. Still, young people who try to kill themselves usually fall into one of three main groups.

■ **Well adjusted, but living with stressful situations.** They may be having difficulty in coping with a sudden crisis—their parents' divorce, for example, or the death of a friend. Failure in school, a romantic break-up, or any other major loss could also serve as a trigger.

■ **Depressed or anxious.** People who feel stressed out or emotionally down are at a much higher risk of suicide. And the risk is higher still when emotional problems are coupled with substance abuse or interpersonal loss.

■ **Impulsive, aggressive, or self-destructive.** Run-aways and drug and alcohol abusers often fit in this high-risk group. Teen suicide attempts are usually impulsive acts, and they're linked to impulsive kids.

Other factors also play a role, and some have different impact than you might expect.

Take money, for example. Even though the problem is often portrayed in economic terms, suicide isn't usually a matter of dollars and cents. Statistics show that rich kids kill themselves as often as poor or middle-income kids.

On the other hand, gender *does* seem to be an important factor. Many young people who are confused about their sexual identity—or who have experienced sexual guilt or embarrassment—can see suicide as the only way to stop their shame or confusion.

And even though girls are about twice as likely to attempt suicide, boys are four times more likely to complete the act.

■ Is there a link between drugs and alcohol and suicide?

Yes, and not just those involving young people. Drugs and alcohol play a major role in suicides of all types.

Today, an estimated half of all suicides are committed by problem drinkers, while as many as two-thirds of all suicides involving young people center around drug use.

Drugs and alcohol become particularly lethal when combined with emotional depression and interpersonal loss—a romantic break-up, for example, or the death of a loved one.

In fact, studies have shown that rates for suicide and attempted suicide are five to 20 times higher among drug and alcohol abusers than the general population.

Drugs and alcohol can be doubly dangerous since so few chemical abusers realize that depression is often drug-related. They think their feelings are a reflection of the way things really are, which can make them feel even more depressed—and more desperate.

■ How to Help

There are a lot of things anyone can—and should—do to help a suicidal person. Besides just “being there” (which can make a *major* difference) it can also help to:

- ▶ **Listen.** Sometimes it helps just knowing that someone else knows how we feel—and cares.
- ▶ **Be honest.** Ask if the person is thinking of suicide. Don't worry about planting an idea that wasn't already there. You won't.
- ▶ **Ask if they've considered a method and have plans to carry it out.** The more specific the plans and the more lethal the method, the more serious the threat.
- ▶ **Provide emotional strength.** Be positive and supportive. Fall apart later if you need to. But in a crisis, focus on the other person's needs—and give all the compassion and caring you can muster. ■

■ Why do so many young people attempt suicide?

There are a lot of reasons for the current explosion of suicide among the young, but none is more important than the stress that kids go through today.

Because the fact is that growing up is more stressful today than it's ever been before.

A lot of factors have been blamed—everything almost from overpopulation and the breakdown of the family to increased pressure to excel and easy access to firearms.



Gender gap. Females are more likely to try suicide, but males are four times as likely to die in an attempt.

Still, we all know that the cumulative weight of life's stresses makes growing up a difficult experience for many young people, one that can seem overwhelming to some.

On top of everything else, there's the romantic image of suicide to contend with.

The fact that suicide is only messy and sad—and hardly romantic—doesn't seem to occur to many young people. It just seems a quick, easy way to make a point—or make someone sorry.

Then there's impulsive ness. Young people often act impulsively, and suicide is usually an impulsive act. Impulsiveness becomes a particular problem when someone is drunk or high.

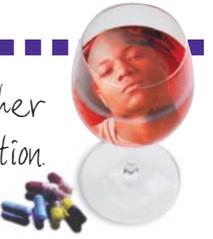
A final reason kids commit suicide can be seen in the rash of “copy-cat” or cluster suicides that happen from time to time. Still, although they're highly publicized, cluster suicides only account for about 5 percent of all suicides.

■ Should all suicide threats be taken seriously?

Yes. Because so many young people are impulsive, threats of suicide should always be taken seriously. Suicide is one case where it's better to guess wrong about someone's intentions than to stay silent.

It's a myth that people who talk about suicide don't do it. They do.

■ Suicide and attempted suicide rates are 5-20 times higher among drug and alcohol abusers than in the general population.



And you won't plant a seed in the person's mind that they wouldn't have planted themselves.

Suicidal people are stressed and depressed, not stupid. They're capable of thinking of suicide all by themselves.

So don't worry about putting ideas into their heads. If the ideas are there, they need to be talked about and dealt with. If they're not there, they won't take root simply because you mention them.

■ What are the warning signs?

Symptoms that may indicate whether or not a person is suicidal fall into three main groups:

▶ **Behavioral changes.** Warning signs can include changes in eating or sleeping patterns, withdrawal from friends and family, drinking or drug use, loss of interest in favorite activities, or giving away valued possessions.



▶ **Personality changes.** Common moods involve anger, anxiety, or depression. Other changes to look for include aggressiveness, hopelessness, hypersensitivity, boredom, difficulty concentrating, or an unexplained decline in school performance.

▶ **Health problems.** Red flags here could involve any serious or life-threatening illness, and even such “minor” complaints as frequent headaches, weight loss or gain, nausea, or fatigue.

The symptoms above don't necessarily mean someone is considering suicide. Still, they *are* signs of a problem and need to be considered carefully.

Because the fact is that two-thirds of those who commit suicide give some warning first. That means it's up to us—as friends, teachers, parents, or relatives—to recognize the signal and respond, person to person.

Ways & means. All suicidal impulses are serious, and the more specific the plan, the more lethal the intent.

▶ Pushing Past Panic

Although depression has long been linked with suicide, scientists now think that panic attacks may even be more likely to trigger suicidal thinking and behavior.

In one recent study, researchers at Columbia University found that people who suffer from panic disorder are much more likely to commit suicide than even the severely depressed.

Panic disorder, which affects an estimated 1.5 percent of the U.S. population, is marked by intense anxiety, rapid heartbeat, and a fear that one is about to die or go crazy.

Researchers say the evidence linking panic to suicide is unmistakable. In fact, they say that panic sufferers are more likely than those with any other emotional disorder to report suicidal thoughts or actions.

Still, there is a bright side to the problem of panic.

For one thing, panic usually passes all by itself, in 90 minutes or so. For another, victims of chronic anxiety or panic are more likely to seek professional help than those reporting other emotional difficulties. Also, panic attacks are increasingly treatable through combinations of short-term drug treatment and psychotherapy. ■



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