



Recognizing and Responding to the Warning Signs of Suicide: A Guide for Teachers and School Staff

Suicide attempts rarely occur without some warning. Teachers and other members of the school staff who see young people on a daily basis are in a unique position to distinguish "normal" adolescent behavior from indications that something is wrong. Signs that a young person may be in emotional pain or considering suicide include the following:

- Suddenly deteriorating academic performance. A young person who was conscientious about his or her school work and who is now neglecting assignments, cutting classes, or missing school altogether may be experiencing problems that can affect academic success, behavior, and health.
- Self-mutilation. Some young people resort to cutting their arms or legs with razor blades and other sharp objects to cope with emotional pain. Self-mutilation is an unmistakable sign that something is wrong.
- A fixation with death or violence. Young people may express this fixation through poetry, essays, doodling, or other artwork.
- Unhealthy peer relationships. A young person whose circle of friends dramatically changes for no apparent reason, who does not have friends, or who begins associating with young people known for substance abuse or other unhealthy behaviors may signal a change in his or her emotional life. These new friends and activities may drive away more positive friends.
- Volatile mood swings or a sudden change in personality. A student who becomes sullen, silent, and withdrawn—or angry and acting out—may have mental health issues that can lead to suicide.
- Indications that the student is in an unhealthy, destructive, or abusive relationship. This can include abusive relationships with peers or family members. Signs of an abusive relationship include unexplained bruises, a swollen face, or other injuries, particularly if the young person refuses to discuss them.
- Dangerous or uncharacteristic risk-taking. Risk-taking behaviors—such as unprotected or promiscuous sex, alcohol or other drug use, driving recklessly or without a license, petty theft or vandalism—can indicate something is wrong in a young person's life.
- Signs of an eating disorder. An eating disorder is an unmistakable sign that a student needs help. A dramatic change in weight that is not associated with a medically supervised diet may also indicate that something is wrong.
- Difficulty in adjusting to gender identity. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered teens have higher suicide attempt rates than their heterosexual peers. While coming to terms with gender identity can be challenging for many young people, gay and lesbian youth face social pressures that can make this adjustment especially difficult.
- Bullying. Children and adolescents who are bullied, as well as those who bully, are at increased risk of depression and suicidal thoughts.
- Depression. Although most people who are clinically depressed do not attempt suicide, depression significantly increases the risk of suicide and suicide attempts.

- The abuse of alcohol or other drugs. Some substance abuse is an attempt by young people to "self-medicate", that is, to relieve emotional pain caused by mental illness, family problems, or other issues.

None of these warning signs are proof-positive that a young person is thinking about taking his or her own life. Many of these signs could indicate that a student is at risk of (or already experiencing) other problems, including severe emotional distress, mental illness (such as depression or bipolar disorder), violence, domestic violence or child abuse, running away from home, or the abuse of alcohol or other drugs. However, there are some warning signs that demand immediate action. These include the following:

- Talking or writing about suicide or death
- Giving direct verbal cues, such as "I wish I were dead" and "I'm going to end it all"
- Giving less direct verbal cues, such as "You will be better off without me," "What's the point of living?," "Soon you won't have to worry about me," and "Who cares if I'm dead, anyway?"
- Isolating him- or herself from friends and family
- Expressing the belief that life is meaningless
- Giving away prized possessions
- Exhibiting a sudden and unexplained improvement in mood after being depressed or withdrawn
- Neglecting his or her appearance and hygiene
- Dropping out of school or social, athletic, and/or community activities
- Obtaining a weapon (such as a firearm) or another means of hurting him- or herself (such as prescription medications)

Any of these warning signs indicate an imminent risk of suicide.

Responding to the Warning Signs

It takes time and courage to reach out to students on a personal level, but a response by a caring adult can be a lifeline to a child in crisis. Young people, especially those with serious emotional or family problems, need support. School may be the last positive social connection for young people from dysfunctional families or who are isolated from their peers.

Many of the same warning signs that a student is at risk for suicide can also indicate that the student is at risk for—or already experiencing—other problems, including emotional distress, mental illness (such as depression or bipolar disorder), violence, domestic violence or child abuse, academic failure, running away from home, or the abuse of alcohol or other drugs. It is not always easy to tell exactly what is troubling a student and if these troubles put a young person at risk for suicide. But an adult who notices any of the warning signs previously described can take steps to protect that student's safety and help him or her get help. Below are some of the steps an adult can take to help students who may be at risk of suicide or of other problems that threaten their well-being.

Ask the Tough Questions. Asking a young person if he or she has thought about suicide will not increase that person's risk. People in mental distress are often relieved that someone cares enough to inquire about their well-being. An expression of concern can counter hopelessness and helplessness. However, adults need to be prepared to ask some very specific and difficult questions in a manner that doesn't judge or threaten the young person who may be at risk. Sometimes it is best to simply ask the direct question: "Are you thinking about killing yourself?" The question can also be prefaced to "soften" it. For example:

- I've noticed that you are going through some rough times. Do you ever wish you could go to sleep and never wake up?

- Sometimes when people feel sad, they have thoughts of harming or killing themselves. Have you had such thoughts?

Be Persistent. A student may feel threatened by questions about suicide or their emotional lives. The student may become upset or deny that he or she is having problems. Adults need to be consistent and firm and make sure that the student gets the help that he or she may need.

Be Prepared to Act. Adults need to know what to do if a student is in danger of harming him- or herself. If the school has an established procedure for this situation, the adult who is intervening needs to explain that procedure to the student. The following items in this list outline the concrete actions that an adult can take if he or she believes a student may be thinking about suicide.

Do Not Leave a Student at Imminent Risk of Suicide Alone. If an adult has any reason to suspect that a student may attempt suicide or otherwise engage in self-harm, that adult needs to remain with the student (or see that the student is in a secure environment, supervised by caring adults) until professional help can be obtained. The student's well-being supersedes any promises of confidentiality made to the student. Adults need to let the student know that they care and are there to help.

Use the School's Support System. School districts typically have crisis policies for working with suicidal or violent students, students who are at risk of suicide or violence, or other youngsters who are not in this acute state of crisis but still need support to stay in school and stay healthy. School staff should be familiar with these policies and programs and use them when appropriate.

Get Help When Needed. If a student is in imminent danger of self-harm, call 911 or (800) 273-TALK (8255). Tell the dispatcher that you are concerned that the person with you "is a danger to [him- or herself]" or "cannot take care of [him- or herself]." Do not hesitate to make this call if you suspect that someone may be a danger to him- or herself. It could save that person's life.

Connect with Parents or Guardians. If a troubled student opens up to you about self-destructive thoughts or actions, contact that student's parents or legal guardian. Do not promise confidentiality to a child when it comes to issues regarding the child's safety—but always talk privately with a student before letting others know of your concerns for the student's safety. If you believe that contacting the parents or guardians may further endanger the child (if, for example, you suspect physical or sexual abuse), contact the proper authorities. In most states, teachers are "mandated reporters" and are required to report suspected child abuse.

Find Someone Who Can Help, If You Feel You Cannot. If a staff member who notices warning signs in a student does not feel comfortable personally intervening, he or she should immediately contact someone else who can. This might be a member of the staff who has received suicide prevention training ("gatekeeper training"), a school counselor, or another adult on staff who may have a more direct personal relationships with that student.

You Can Help

It is not always possible to tell exactly what is troubling a student and where these troubles may lead. But indications that a young person is in emotional difficulty demand action. You cannot assume that a young person's family will take positive steps to respond to these problems. The school may be the last positive social connection for students from dysfunctional families. By acting on these warning signs, schools can

help students become healthier, happier, and achieve academic success. And in some cases, action will save a life.

For More Information

Information on Preventing Suicide in Schools: For more information on suicide among young people and steps schools can take to help prevent these suicides, see *How Schools Can Prevent Suicide*, a Prevention Brief available at the National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention's Web site (<http://www.promoteprevent.org>).

Resources on Preventing Youth Suicide: For additional resources on preventing youth suicide, see the *Suicide Prevention Resource Page*, which can be found in the *Resource Pages* section of the National Center for Mental Health and Youth Violence Prevention's Web site (<http://www.promoteprevent.org>).

Resources on Crisis Preparation and Response: For additional resources on creating a crisis preparation and response plan, see the *Crisis Preparation and Response Resource page*, which also can be found in the *Resource Pages* section of the National Center for Mental Health and Youth Violence Prevention's Web site.

May 2006