

Warning Signs of Suicide

Listen and look for these warning signs for suicidal behavior. Warning signs are the earliest detectable signs that indicate heightened risk for suicide *in the near term* (i.e., within minutes, hours, days), as opposed to risk factors that suggest longer-term risk (i.e., a year to a lifetime). Note that aside from direct statements or behaviors threatening suicide, it is often a constellation of signs that raises concern, rather than one or two symptoms alone. The following signs are presented in a hierarchical manner, organized by degree of risk, and were developed by an expert working group convened by the American Association of Suicidology.

Warning Signs for Suicide and Corresponding Actions*

Call 9-1-1 or seek immediate help from a mental health provider when you hear or see any of these behaviors:

- Someone threatening to hurt or kill himself, or talking of wanting to hurt or kill himself
- Someone looking for ways to kill herself by seeking access to firearms, available pills, or other means
- Someone talking or writing about death, dying, or suicide, when these actions are out of the ordinary for the person

Seek help by contacting a mental health professional or calling the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) for a referral should you witness, hear, or see someone exhibiting one or more of these behaviors:

- Hopelessness
- Rage, uncontrolled anger, seeking revenge
- Acting reckless or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking
- Feeling trapped—like there's no way out
- Withdrawing from friends, family, and society
- Anxiety, agitation, unable to sleep or sleeping all the time
- Dramatic mood changes
- No reason for living; no sense of purpose in life

* Adapted by the Maine Youth Suicide Prevention Program from a Suicide Prevention Resource Center document accessed at www.sprc.org.

Warning signs of suicide can be organized around the word “FACTS”:

Feelings
Actions
Changes
Threats
Situations

Feelings

- Hopelessness: feeling like things are bad and won't get any better
- Fear of losing control, going crazy, harming himself/herself or others
- Helplessness: a belief that there's nothing that can be done to make life better
- Worthlessness: feeling like an awful person and that people would be better off if he/she were dead
- Hating himself/herself, feeling guilty or ashamed
- Being extremely sad and lonely
- Feeling anxious, worried, or angry all the time

Actions

- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Talking or writing about death or destruction
- Aggression: getting into fights or having arguments with other people
- Recklessness: doing risky or dangerous things

Changes

- Personality: behaving like a different person, becoming withdrawn, tired all the time, not caring about anything, or becoming more talkative or outgoing

- Behavior: can't concentrate on school or regular tasks
- Sleeping pattern: sleeping all the time or not being able to sleep at all, or waking up in the middle of the night or early in the morning and not being able to get back to sleep
- Eating habits: loss of appetite and/or overeating and gaining weight
- Losing interest in friends, hobbies, and appearance or in activities or sports previously enjoyed
- Sudden improvement after a period of being down or withdrawn

Threats

- Statements like “How long does it take to bleed to death?”
- Threats like “I won't be around much longer” or “Don't tell anyone else... you won't be my friend if you tell!”
- Plans like giving away favorite things, studying about ways to die, obtaining a weapon or a stash of pills: the risk is very high if a person has a plan and the way to do it
- Suicide attempts like overdosing, wrist cutting

Situations

- Getting into trouble at school, at home, or with the law
- Recent loss through death, divorce, or separation; the breakup of a relationship; losing an opportunity or a dream; losing self-esteem
- Changes in life that feel overwhelming
- Being exposed to suicide or the death of a peer under any circumstances