

# HEALTH NOTES

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## SUICIDE PREVENTION

Did you know that there are almost twice as many suicides as homicides in the U.S. each year? With over 30,000 people dying by suicide each year (an average of 82 per day) the Surgeon General's Call to Action (1999) defined suicide as a public health problem, and advocacy groups for suicide prevention have come together to spread awareness and provide suggestions of how to respond to concerns.

Though suicide is currently the eleventh leading cause of death in the U.S., interventions are complicated by misunderstanding: over 90% of those who die by suicide had a diagnosable mental illness (often, depression). Unfortunately, common myths and stigma prevent people from seeking help, even though there are effective treatments available.

### QUICK FACTS

- Each year, more than 30,000 Americans die by suicide
- Suicide is currently the 11<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death
- 90% of people who die by suicide have a mental illness (most are not in treatment)
- 70% of people who die by suicide tell someone about their thoughts in advance (others may not be aware of the significance of these warnings or don't know how to respond to them)
- Those who have made a serious attempt in the past are at much higher risk for actually taking their lives: between 20 and 40% of people who kill themselves have previously attempted suicide
- Nearly 50% of suicide victims have a positive blood alcohol level
- Females attempt suicide three times more often than males; however, males complete suicide four times as often as females
- Completed (successful, not just threatened) suicide is highest among the elderly (age 80 and older)
- Though most depressed people are not suicidal, most suicidal people are depressed
- Serious depression can be seen in obvious sadness, but often it is expressed instead as a loss of pleasure or withdrawal from activities that were once enjoyable
- Sometimes those who are considering suicide talk as if they are saying goodbye or going away forever
- Surviving family members and friends not only suffer the trauma of losing a loved one to suicide but may be at higher risk for suicide and emotional problems themselves, because of social stigma and isolation
- Talking about suicide doesn't cause someone to be suicidal – in fact, talking to someone who cares may prevent the need to take action
- **Suicide is preventable** – most suicidal individuals desperately want to live; they are just unable to see alternatives to their problems

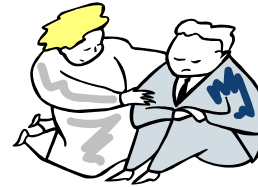
### WARNING SIGNS

There are often early warning signs that we might see or hear – these should trigger us to call for help, or accompany the person to a mental health professional:

- Hopelessness
- Rage, uncontrolled anger, seeking revenge
- Acting recklessly, engaging in risky activities
- Feeling trapped, like there's no way out
- Increased alcohol or drug use
- Withdrawing from friends, family and society
- Anxiety, agitation, unable to sleep or sleeping all the time
- Dramatic mood changes
- No sense of purpose in life – “no reason for living”

Sometimes, the warning signs – “cries for help” – are much more direct:

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



### BUT HOW CAN I HELP??

Surprisingly, nearly everyone at some time in his or her life thinks about suicide. Most of us decide to live because we realize that the crisis is temporary, but death is not. On the other hand, people in the midst of a crisis often feel an utter loss of control... they can't stop the pain; can't think clearly; can't sleep, eat or work; can't make decisions; can't make the sadness go away; can't see themselves as valuable. In order to help, we must

- Be aware: learn the warning signs
- Get involved; be available, showing interest and support
- Talk openly and freely, even ask directly if he/she is thinking about suicide
- Be willing to listen: allow for expression of feelings and accept the feelings without judgment (don't debate whether suicide is right or wrong, or their feelings are good or bad; don't lecture on the value of life)
- Don't “dare” him/her to do it by saying something like “Aw, sure... you'd never have the nerve...”
- Don't act shocked – this creates distance
- Don't promise to keep it a secret – seek help! Take action, remove the means (pills, weapons) and contact individuals or agencies specializing in crisis intervention and suicide prevention:

“911”

Your pastor

School counselor or psychologist  
Family physician or private therapist  
Community mental health agency  
Suicide prevention center

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