Suicide signs and prevention

Suicide—No one wants to talk about it. The words secret, stigma and taboo come to mind when we hear it voiced. But it doesn't discriminate; individuals from every race, age, culture, class and gender are affected by suicide. At one time or another, every person finds life overwhelming. Some can't cope or can't find a solution to their emotions or troubles and fall into despair seeing suicide as the only way out.



Before a person reaches this stage, however, there are often red flags. It's vital that these signs aren't ignored, overlooked or minimized by family, friends and loved ones. The information provided here can help you understand the causes and warning signs and offer some suggestions on suicide prevention.

A common struggle

Suicide is more widespread than you might think—it's the fourth leading cause of death worldwide. Here in Canada more than 3,500 people lose their lives to suicide each year. It's easy to feel sorrow and regret not only for the victims, but also for their loved ones who are deeply affected by the loss.

While many find the topic uncomfortable to talk about, the reality is that suicide can affect anyone. If you suspect someone you know is considering suicide, act quickly to get them professional support. Or if you find yourself contemplating it, contact a counsellor, medical professional or suicide/distress hotline immediately. There are many reasons that can cause someone to see suicide as the only solution to their problems and it may, at one time or another, happen to you, your family, friends, neighbours or co-workers.

Why suicide?

Hopeless, helpless, worthless and desperate: these are strong words to describe the intense feelings many people who've contemplated suicide experience. Whatever the trigger, suicide may seem like the only solution to an unsolvable, painful problem. A suicidal person believes no one can help them and that the problem can't be fixed. People are at a greater risk of committing suicide if they:

- Have a personal or family history of mental illness including depression, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia
- Are experiencing a serious physical illness
- Have made previous suicide threats or attempts
- Have a family history of suicide or suicide attempts
- Abuse alcohol or drugs
- Have been dealt an emotional blow such as the death of a loved one, unemployment or divorce
- Are undergoing major changes in their life

Warning signs

Being aware of what signs to look for is a huge step in preventing suicide. You or your loved one may exhibit multiple signs or just one. Any indication should prompt you to get help immediately. It's also important to remember that for different age groups—i.e., teens, adults and seniors—there may be different factors that cause stress and depression that would make someone more likely to consider suicide as an answer.

Teens can have a difficult time at school with friends, teachers, parental expectations or work load. Adults may be faced with divorce or job loss. Seniors may experience the death of a spouse or diagnosis of a life-limiting illness. Common danger signs include:

- Repeated expressions of hopelessness, helplessness, worthlessness or desperation;

- Behaviour that is out of character—e.g., someone who is normally careful acts recklessly;

- Symptoms of depression—sleeplessness, social withdrawal, loss of appetite, loss of interest in activity;
- A sudden and unexpected change in someone suffering from anxiety or depression to an unusually cheerful attitude;
- Giving away prized possessions to friends and family; making a will, taking out insurance or other preparations for death;
- Making remarks related to death and dying or telling someone they intend to commit suicide, even in a joking manor; and/or
- Tension, anxiety, nervousness, impulsiveness.

A cry for help

Many people who consider or plan for suicide may not really want to die. They may simply see it as the only solution to end their pain and suffering.

When your loved one exhibits warning signs, it's a cry for help. Take action by seeking support immediately. If you find suicidal thoughts entering your inner dialogue, discuss these thoughts with a person you trust—be it a loved one or a medical professional. By getting help as soon as the warning signs appear, suicide, in many cases, can be prevented.

How to help

Watching someone in emotional pain is never easy, especially when it's a loved one you care deeply about. While it may be instinctive to try and minimize or downplay the signs of a loved one contemplating suicide, (most likely because you don't want to think the unthinkable) your involvement can play a critical role in suicide prevention.

Remember: if someone you know is considering suicide or has already created a suicide plan and you sense it's an emergency situation, act immediately and call 911.

If you're concerned about the possibility, but are unsure about your loved one's state of mind, break down the walls of silence and:

Offer support. Warning signs or talk of suicide are a distress signal. Find a safe, private place to voice your concerns, speak to your loved one and better assess the situation.

Be direct. Don't be afraid to bring up suicide. There is absolutely no evidence to suggest that talking about it will make the person take his or her life.

On the contrary, it can only help. Talk openly about feelings and concerns and never make a promise to keep it a secret. Instead, promise to assist your loved one in getting help. Ask if he or she has a suicide plan. It's important to find out this information to pass on to a professional.

Listen. Be a non-judgmental voice. Don't tell your loved one not to think about suicide or minimize problems. Lend a caring ear. Give as much time as needed to talk and let your loved one know you're there to offer support.

Take protective steps. Your loved one shouldn't be alone for the next few days or weeks. Ask who else he or she feels comfortable accepting help from. Make your schedule readily available—don't promise to be there if you can't. Help make contact with health professionals, family, friends and other organizations on your loved one's behalf.

Draft a promise. Have your loved one promise or even sign a contract stating he or she won't hurt themselves before seeing a mental health professional. Conversely, you should vow your unwavering support for the long haul. Call often and check on your loved one's progress.

Remove all dangers. Any firearms, prescription and non-prescription drugs or medications should be removed from your loved one's home and there shouldn't be access to any dangerous items.

Getting support for yourself

If you are having suicidal thoughts, you may feel no one can help. But the best thing you can do is speak to someone. It's less of a risk to open up than it is to take your life.

Pick someone you trust and feel comfortable with such as a counsellor, doctor, suicide hotline distress counsellor, family member, friend, religious leader or other health professional. You can overcome this feeling of desperation and regain your life by:

- Calling a counsellor or a crisis support line;
- Seeing your family doctor who can refer you to counselling services;
- Seeking out a mental health professional;
- Visiting an emergency room at the hospital if you feel you need immediate help;
- Speaking to people who have been suicidal and recovered;
- Promising yourself not to make any rash or spur-of-themoment decisions; and/or
- Talking to family and friends.

Looking to the future

People who are or have been suicidal have many options to help them regain their mental and physical health. These include:

- Support groups;
- Visits with a mental health professional;
- Counselling services;
- Encouragement and support from family and friends;
- Education on depression, mental illness, stress and coping strategies; and/or
- Medical assistance.

Remember, if you or a loved one is having feelings or thoughts of suicide, you're not alone. There are many people who have considered or attempted to take their lives and made a full recovery.

For those in the depths of despair, suicide may seem like an easy escape. But it is never the right answer. Whether you or a loved one is contemplating suicide, help is always there. Regardless of the path taken on the road to recovery, seeking professional support and talking honestly and openly about thoughts and emotions will help to break down the barriers suicide can build. And once the walls are down, it's easier to see that there is light beyond even the darkest of days.