

# Helping a Teenager Who May Be at Risk of Suicide

•Signs to watch for•Having the difficult conversation•Suicide prevention at work•Resources for those in need•If you have been affected by a suicide

The teenage years can be a challenging time for you and your child. Adolescents may break rules or experiment with different behaviors as they try to establish their independence. As a parent, it's important to pay attention during this period of change. Mood swings are normal, but young people who are at risk for suicide will often give clues that they feel hopeless or out of control.

By staying involved in your child's life, talking openly together, and knowing the warning signs of suicide, you can help deter at-risk behavior and support your child with helpful interventions when needed.

## Warning signs

Some changes in behavior are normal in teenagers. Due to physical and emotional developments, there may be times when your adolescent seems moody, irritable, or withdrawn. But changes that disrupt your child's ability to function on a day-to-day basis, may indicate adolescent depression—a condition that can lead to suicidal behavior. While a diagnosis of depression or another mood disorder may be a factor, teenagers may be at a high risk for suicide even if they haven't been diagnosed. In fact, some may not have been diagnosed because they hadn't received professional help for their mental health.

You should be aware of the following warning signs:

**Withdrawal and loss of interest.** If your child seems depressed for more than two weeks at a time, turns inward, pulls away from peers, quits activities, or has a significant drop in academic performance, you should be concerned.

**Recent important losses or situational crises.** Your teenager may become at risk as a result of problems or situational crises. These may include divorce in the family, the break-up of a romantic relationship, being a victim of bullying or harassment, or the death of a loved one. In addition, having a family member, friend, or peer who has died by suicide increases your child's risk of suicide.

**Major changes in sleep or eating patterns.** Worn and tired appearance, inability to sleep or sleeping excessively, loss of appetite, or overeating, may be signs that your child is suffering from depression.

**Written or spoken threats of suicide, including social media posts.** It's very common for teenagers who are at risk for suicide to make some kind of suggestive remark beforehand. Examples include statements like "Sometimes I wish the pain was all over," "I might as well be dead," or "They will be sorry (or better off) when I'm gone."

**Obsession with death.** Preoccupation with themes of illness, death, and dying should be monitored closely. Signs of this may include writing poems, essays, or online posts, or creating pieces of artwork that refer to death.

**High-risk behaviors.** These include reckless driving, running away from home, increased alcohol or drug use, food issues, problematic friendships, and criminal behavior. Watch out for any kind of irrational, abnormal behavior at home or at school.

**Depression that suddenly lifts for unknown reasons.** This may indicate that your teenager has decided to die by suicide and is now focusing energy on carrying through with any plans. The risk of suicide may be the greatest at this point.

## Steps to take

**Take action right away.** Trust your instincts. If it seems like the situation may be serious, seek professional help immediately. Break a confidence if necessary; you could save your child's life.

**Talk with your teenager.** Don't be afraid to ask your child, "Are you feeling so upset that you are thinking about hurting yourself?" If the response is "Yes," take this very seriously. If there seems to be a definite plan, a set time, and the means, your child is at very high risk for suicide. Asking questions *will not* put the idea of suicide into someone's head.

**Seek immediate help from a professional.** Contact a pediatrician, mental health professional, school psychologist, school counselor, or an emergency room immediately. You or your teen could also call a suicide hotline, such as the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#), formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, by dialing **988** (or 1-800-273-8255).

**If you keep guns at home, store them safely or move all firearms elsewhere.** Keep alcohol, medications, and pesticides securely locked, too. Many suicides among teenagers and young adults involve guns, medications, and pesticides. In addition, alcohol can impair a teenager's judgment. And the effects of drugs can be even more dangerous when mixed with alcohol.

**Encourage your child not to become isolated from family and friends.** Help your child see and keep in touch with the important people in their life. "It's usually better to be around other people than to be alone," the American Academy of Pediatrics says, but don't push if your child says no.

## How do I talk with my teenager about suicide?

Do not be afraid to talk with your teenager about suicide. Talking openly and sincerely allows them to communicate their distress to you and can help prevent your child from acting on harmful thoughts. Take the time to support and listen to your child — showing how concerned you are and how much you care can make a real difference.

If your child is making suicidal threats or exhibiting suicidal behavior, here are some ways you can help:

**Tell your teenager that you care and are worried.** You may think your teen knows how much you love them, but reminders can help your child feel they're not alone. [Unicef](#) suggests reassuring your teen by saying, "you know you can always talk to me about anything." They add, "this will let them know that they can speak to you, and that you want to help them."

**Set up a time to talk.** Pick a time when you and your teen can focus on the conversation. Minimize distractions, like the TV, phone, or household interruptions. Let your teenager know that you want to discuss some of their behavior—not to judge or punish, but because you are concerned.

**Describe what you've noticed.** Be specific. You might say, "You've seemed kind of sad over the past few weeks." Be clear about why the behavior troubles you.

**Be willing to listen and provide support.** Listen to your teen without interrupting or judging. It's easy for emotions to get in the way but try to stay as calm as possible while you listen. Try to see things from your teenager's point of view. Teenagers are likely to be more comfortable telling the truth if they're shown respect for what they have to say.

**Ask concerned questions and then listen.** Do not minimize your child's feelings or perceptions. While it may be difficult to hear, it's important to listen to your child's pain. Do not try to change your teenager's mood right away by making statements like "Everything is going to be fine" or "That's no big deal, you can't let something like that get you down." Although well-meaning, statements like these can discourage your teen from opening up.

**Work with your teen on a plan of action.** Have a conversation to begin working toward a solution. What help do you need to address the problem? Would your teenager benefit from seeing a mental health counselor or talking with another trusted adult? Together, come up with a plan to involve others who can help you find solutions. Following through on your role in the plan of action shows your child that you can be relied upon and trusted.

**Offer hope.** Saying things like, "We're in this together," "I'll see you tomorrow," or "Give me a call later" will let your teenager know that they're not alone and that you want to share the future with them. Making plans to spend time together will keep your teenager focused on the future — an important step toward recovery.

**Encourage your child to exercise.** Do all you can to make it possible for your child to engage in exercise that's fun. Physical activity has been shown to help relieve mild to moderate depression symptoms and stimulates the production of endorphins, often called the "feel-good" hormones.

## Where to get help and support

Discuss with your teenager options for advice and support.

**Support at school.** School mental health and crisis team members are responsible for conducting suicide risk assessment, communicating with parents, and providing referrals to community mental health services. They can also provide support at school. Contact your teen's school counselor or school psychologist if you have concerns.

**Family doctor.** Your child's pediatrician or the family doctor can address a health problem affecting your teenager. A physician can prescribe medication for depression, if needed, and refer you to other resources in your community.

**Friend or relative.** A trusted adult can give advice, answer questions about depression and other problems, or offer alternatives to running away. A friend or relative might also encourage your teen to accept professional help.

**Your organization's assistance program, if available.** Assistance programs (or EAPs) have professional counselors you can talk with confidentially. They are experienced in adolescent and family issues and can help with troubling behaviors such as alcohol and drug abuse, eating disorders, self-destructive behavior, and low self-esteem issues.

**Seek support for yourself, too.** One way to help your teenager is to make sure you have support from others who recognize how difficult this time can be for *you*. A partner, friend, therapist, or counselor at your assistance program may provide the help you need. You might also consider joining a support group for parents.

Establishing a healthy relationship with your teenager is one of the best ways to keep your child from engaging in at-risk behaviors. Spending time together, helping your child build self-esteem, and keeping the lines of communication open are all ways to provide a strong foundation of safety and support.

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