

# Understanding and Preventing Suicide

*Chances are you have an acquaintance, friend or relative who has attempted or committed suicide. Maybe you have seriously considered taking your life. Every minute an American tries to commit suicide; each day 60 or 70 succeed. In the United States alone, some 25,000 people kill themselves every year.*

*Many suicides are reported as accidents or disguised in other ways. Despite this fact, suicide still ranks as one of the ten leading causes of death in the United States.*

*The good news is that we can prevent many suicides. To reduce our high rate of suicide, we must learn more about it, correct our misconceptions, and know how to reach out to those in need.*



## GETTING THE FACTS STRAIGHT

Suicide is an uncomfortable, sensitive and misunderstood topic. There are many myths floating around.

Here are the facts:

- ◆ People who talk about or threaten suicide should be taken seriously. About 75 percent of those who attempt suicide give messages beforehand.
- ◆ An individual is at greater risk for suicide if he or she has a family member who committed suicide. However, there is no evidence to suggest that we inherit suicidal behavior.
- ◆ Most individuals who attempt suicide don't really want to die. They only want to end their pain.
- ◆ It is true that a previous suicide attempt increases the risk of future attempts. Nevertheless, the majority of people who attempt suicide do not try it again. Wanting to kill oneself is a feeling that usually passes with time.
- ◆ More women attempt suicide, but more men kill themselves. Men use more violent, foolproof methods such as guns. However, the number of women using violent methods is increasing.
- ◆ Many suicides take place during a several month period following improvement, when the individual has the energy to carry out his or her morbid thoughts.
- ◆ Openly talking about suicide can be an important mental health and prevention strategy. We do not reduce the risk of suicide by avoiding the subject.

## GROUPS AT RISK

Some groups of people have a higher than average risk of suicide. Among them are Native Americans (especially males in their 20s and 30s), youth over-

whelmed with personal and interpersonal problems, Vietnam veterans, prisoners, gay men and lesbians, young African-Americans and Hispanics, elderly people who are sick and abandoned, physicians and other professionals who struggle with substance abuse or emotional challenges, and middle-agers profoundly disappointed with their lives.

## WARNING SIGNS OF POTENTIAL SUICIDE

The following items may indicate a variety of other problems in addition to suicidal potential. The risk increases if a person shows a number of these warning signs:

- ✓ Threats of suicide
- ✓ Previous suicide attempts
- ✓ Withdrawal from friends and social activities
- ✓ Abrupt behavior changes (moodiness, apathy)
- ✓ Giving away prized possessions
- ✓ Settling of affairs (life insurance, wills)
- ✓ Acting hopeless, feelings of worthlessness
- ✓ Crying, sleeplessness, loss of appetite
- ✓ Preoccupation with thoughts of death
- ✓ Substantial marital or family problems
- ✓ Substance abuse
- ✓ Worrying about financial difficulties
- ✓ Sudden appearance of forced happiness after displaying some of the above characteristics

## MOTIVATIONS FOR SUICIDAL BEHAVIOR

Why do people commit, attempt, threaten or think about suicide? The San Diego Center for Information on Suicide has identified a number of possible reasons including wanting to: escape from an intolerable situa-



tion; join a deceased loved one; gain attention, manipulate others; avoid punishment for a crime; control the timing of death; end an unresolvable conflict; become a martyr; punish survivors; or enact revenge.

## WHERE TO TURN FOR HELP

If you, a friend or a loved one show some of the above signs, seek help from a local suicide prevention or crisis intervention center. Other good sources of assistance include mental health centers, therapists, physicians, hospitals, or a minister, priest, rabbi, or other spiritual leaders. As a concerned friend or loved one of a person who may be suicidal, your role is critical. Besides linking the individual to professional help, you can provide caring and informed support.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP A PERSON WHO MAY BE SUICIDAL

- ◆ **Know the warning signs.** Be aware of clues to suicide such as those highlighted earlier in this fact sheet. Being alert to these signs will enable you to offer help before the person's distress turns into a crisis.
- ◆ **Take threats or talk of self-destruction seriously.** Even if the person may not actually intend to take her life, she probably is sending an important message of despair and asking for help. Respond.
- ◆ **Risk getting involved.** If you are concerned that a friend might be thinking about ending it all, express your concern. Ask her if she has been having thoughts of suicide. If she says yes, do the SAL assessment described in the following section, "Assessing the Risk of Suicide."
- ◆ **Listen carefully to the person's feelings and thoughts.** She probably feels isolated and thinks nobody understands her pain. Reflect what you hear her saying. For example, "You're afraid things are only going to get worse." Try to see things from her point of view.
- ◆ **Encourage a change of pace.** If the individual has been inside, encourage him to join you for a walk or jog in the fresh air. Perhaps the two of you could visit a friend or go out for a bite to eat.
- ◆ **Remove potential instruments of suicide.** Even if you're pretty sure he will be OK, it's still a good idea to place a confidential call to the local suicide or crisis hotline. (Check with your telephone operator or look in the phone book.) A professional or trained volunteer can ease your mind and provide helpful advice. If the situation is immediately life-threatening, call the police.
- ◆ **Remember, you are not responsible for another person's actions.** Suicidal individuals ultimately must help themselves. What you can do is be as caring and supportive as possible.

◆ **Stay in touch with the person.** After the initial emergency has passed, check in with your friend to see how he is feeling.

## ASSESSING THE RISK OF SUICIDE

Determining suicidal risk is a sensitive and complicated matter. It's always a good idea to at least touch bases with a qualified mental health professional. If a person says he or she has been thinking about suicide, ask, "Do you have a plan of how you want to kill yourself?"

If the person does have a plan, the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center recommends using the acronym SAL to assess the risk. The more Specific, Available and Lethal the plan, the higher the risk.

**Specific**—How *specific* are the details of the plan?

**Available**—Is the instrument (weapon, pills, etc.)

*available* to carry out the threat?

**Lethal**—How *lethal* is the proposed method?

## WHAT NOT TO DO

- ◆ Don't make statements such as, "Snap out of it," "Everything is all right," or "I know just how you feel."
- ◆ Don't leave the person alone or delay dealing with the situation if you think the risk is immediate.
- ◆ Don't promise to keep a discussion of suicide a secret. This cuts off avenues of help for both of you.



*Each suicide is a tragedy that takes a precious life. Each suicide also leaves in its wake dozens of friends and family members who may struggle with immeasurable and long-standing pain. Fortunately, with greater awareness and a willingness to reach out, we can prevent many suicides.*

Prepared by **Sam Quick**, Human Development & Family Relations Specialist; **Bill Mallory**, Fayette County Extension Agent for 4-H Youth Development; **Joseph Arnold**, National Certified Counselor, Louisville; **John Rapping**, Graduate Student, Department of Family Studies; and **Darla Botkin**, Associate Professor in the Department of Family Studies. (FAM-SAM.124)

*Educational programs of the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service serve all people regardless of race, color, age, sex, religion, disability, or national origin.*