Recognizing Suicidal Behavior

Suicide is not a mental illness in itself, but a serious potential consequence of many mental disorders, particularly major depression.

**Who is most likely to commit suicide?**

Suicide rates are highest in teens, young adults, and the elderly. People over the age of 65 have the highest rate of suicide. Although women are more likely to attempt suicide, men are more likely to be successful. Suicide risk also is higher in the following groups:

* Older people who have lost a spouse through death or divorce
* People who have attempted suicide in the past
* People with a family history of suicide
* People with a friend or co-worker who committed suicide
* People with a history of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse
* People who are unmarried, unskilled, or unemployed
* People with long-term pain, or a disabling or terminal illness
* People who are prone to violent or impulsive behavior
* People who have recently been released from a psychiatric hospitalization (This often is a very frightening period of transition.)
* People in certain professions, such as police officers and health care providers who work with terminally ill patients
* People with substance abuse problems

**What are the warning signs for suicide?**

Following are some of the possible warning signs that a person may be at risk for suicide:

* **Excessive sadness or moodiness** — Long-lasting sadness and mood swings can be symptoms of depression, a major risk factor for suicide.
* **Sudden calmness** — Suddenly becoming calm after a period of depression or moodiness can be a sign that the person has made a decision to end his or her life.
* **Withdrawal**— Choosing to be alone and avoiding friends or social activities also are possible symptoms of depression. This includes the loss of interest or pleasure in activities the person previously enjoyed.
* **Changes in personality and/or appearance** — A person who is considering suicide might exhibit a change in attitude or behavior, such as speaking or moving with unusual speed or slowness. In addition, the person might suddenly become less concerned about his or her personal appearance.
* **Dangerous or self-harmful behavior** — Potentially dangerous behavior, such as reckless driving, engaging in unsafe sex, and increased use of drugs and/or alcohol might indicate that the person no longer values his or her life.
* **Recent trauma or life crisis** — A major life crises might trigger a suicide attempt. Crises include the death of a loved one or pet, divorce or break-up of a relationship, diagnosis of a major illness, loss of a job, or serious financial problems.
* **Making preparations** — Often, a person considering suicide will begin to put his or her personal business in order. This might include visiting friends and family members, giving away personal possessions, making a will, and cleaning up his or her room or home. Some people will write a note before committing suicide.
* **Threatening suicide** — Not everyone who is considering suicide will say so, and not everyone who threatens suicide will follow through with it. However, every threat of suicide should be taken seriously.

**Can suicide be prevented?**

In many cases, suicide can be prevented. Research suggests that the best way to prevent suicide is to know the risk factors, be alert to the signs of depression and other mental disorders, recognize the warning signs for suicide, and intervene before the person can complete the process of self-destruction.

People who receive support from caring friends and family, and who have access to mental health services are less likely to act on their suicidal impulses than are those who are isolated from sources of care and support. If someone you know is exhibiting warning signs for suicide, don’t be afraid to ask if he or she is depressed or thinking about suicide. In some cases, the person just needs to know that someone cares and is looking for the chance to talk about his or her feelings. You can then encourage the person to seek professional help.

**What should I do if someone I know is talking about committing suicide?**

If someone you know is threatening suicide, take the threat seriously.

* Do not leave the person alone. If possible, ask for help from friends or other family members.
* Ask the person to give you any weapons he or she might have. Take away sharp objects or anything else that the person could use to hurt himself or herself.
* Try to keep the person as calm as possible.
* Call 911 or take the person to an emergency room.

© Copyright 1995-2009 The Cleveland Clinic Foundation. All rights reserved.