

To prevent suicide you need to recognize it, talk about it and respond to it effectively

As a parent or teacher, you observe first-hand the tremendous physical, mental and social changes your child undergoes as they become an adult. Teenagers at times may struggle with feelings of stress and turmoil when dealing with a wide range of issues, including sexuality, intense emotional relationships, self image, family expectations, peer pressure to fit in, bullying, break-up of a family, alcohol and drug use, a major loss or trauma, and pressure to do well at school and work.

As adults we, for the most part, have developed healthy and adaptive coping mechanisms to deal with life's challenges through our experiences. Younger people have had fewer opportunities to develop coping skills and a sense of perspective. What may feel like a short-term issue to an adult is often magnified for a youth and may not feel temporary at all.

What are the warning signs of suicide?

Parents and teachers should be aware of the following warning signs of children or teens that may be at risk to try to kill themselves.

- Withdrawal from family, friends, school, interests or part-time job. Loss of interest in things previously enjoyed
- Slipping grades, skipping classes or problems concentrating
- Increase in risk-taking or reckless behaviours
- New or increased self-harm behaviour
- Increase in substance use
- Increased aggression, irritability, acting-out behaviours, rapid mood changes or “flat” mood
- Increased conflicts with family or friends
- Putting their affairs in order, for example giving away favourite possessions or throwing away important belongings
- Dark themes in art, poetry or writing
- Expressing feelings of depression, hopelessness and helplessness, such as “Everyone will be better without me”, “I wish I were dead” or “I just can’t take it anymore”
- Expressing feelings of being a bad person, feelings of guilt or shame
- Changes in eating, sleeping or personal hygiene habits
- Frequent complaints about physical symptoms, often related to emotions, such as stomach aches, headaches, fatigue, etc.
- Making self-critical remarks or having difficulty accepting praise
- Talk of death or suicide, making jokes about suicide like “You’ll miss me when I’m gone”

How do you talk to your child about suicide?

If you see any of the warning signs or parental intuition tells you there's something wrong, take action – Talk about it. Whether you go to them, or they start the conversation with you, here are some helpful tips.

- Listen – first and foremost – without judgment and with an open mind.
- Don't dismiss or minimize a young person's stress, loss or experience. If it's significant to them, it's significant. Recognize this and validate their feelings.
- Communicate acceptance of their feelings – whatever those feelings are. Feelings aren't wrong, they just are what they are and need to be acknowledged and listened to.
- Avoid “parent-speak”, for example “All this won't be a big deal when you're older” or “When I was your age...” Listen to a youth the same way you would want to be listened to if you reached out yourself to a trusted friend, with the same respect and openness you would seek yourself.
- Let them know you care, that they matter to you and you want to support them in any way you can.
- Ask about suicide directly if you are concerned that this may be an issue. People do not become more suicidal by talking about it and suicide is not an “idea” you can plant in someone's head. Individuals are often relieved to be able to talk about how they feel and what they're going through. Use clear language like “Are you thinking about suicide” or “Have things gotten so bad that you're thinking of killing yourself?”
- Get help and take threats seriously. If your child or anyone else talks of suicide, always take this seriously and seek assistance. Contact your family doctor, a mental health professional, the Child, Youth and Family Crisis Line of Eastern Ontario (In Ottawa: 613.260.2360, long distance toll-free: 1.877.377.7775) or take your child to your closest emergency room.

For more information:

- DIFD: difd.ca
- Ontario Association for Suicide Prevention: ospn.ca
- Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention: suicideprevention.ca
- Centre for Suicide Prevention: suicideinfo.ca
- Parents Lifeline of Eastern Ontario: pleo.on.ca
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (select Facts for Families): aacap.org

If someone close to you has died by suicide

This is not your fault, no matter what you may think or how you may feel. Sadly, one of the toughest things to cope with after a loss to suicide is a feeling of “What did I miss?” and “I should have, could have, would have...” Be kind to yourself. Remember that you did the best you could with what you knew at the time. It is normal to feel guilty or to blame yourself, but you are not to blame.

Something positive can come of this loss. Learn from it and reach out to others. Talk about mental health and wellness, learn more about suicide prevention and help reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues and suicide. You may not have been able to prevent this loss, but you can take the difficult learning from it to help make your community safer from suicide in the future.

You are not alone in your loss, and you can get help. Bereaved Families of Ontario Ottawa Chapter (www.bfo-ottawa.org, 613.567.4278) have support groups to help people who have lost a loved one to suicide. This is often a very helpful source of support after surviving the loss of someone you care about to suicide.

“Collateral Damage, Images of Those Left Behind by Suicide,” will be a book of portraits, website and gallery exhibition of people who have had loved ones die by suicide. Visit leftbehindbysuicide.org.