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HEALTH ISSUES

10 Things Parents Can Do to Prevent Suicide

As children grow into teenagers, it becomes more challenging for parents to know what they are thinking and feeling. When do the normal ups and downs of adolescence become something to worry about?



It's important to learn about the factors that can put a teen at risk for suicide (/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Which-Kids-are-at-Highest-Risk-for-Suicide.aspx). **Spend some time reading these ten ways you can help prevent a tragedy from occurring. The more you know, the better you'll be prepared for understanding what can put your child at risk.**

1. Don't let your teen's depression or anxiety snowball.

Maybe your child is merely having a bad day, but maybe it's something more if this mood has been going on for a couple of weeks.

- **Fact:** 9 in 10 teens who take their own lives were previously diagnosed with a psychiatric or mental health condition or disorder—more than half of them with a mood disorder (/English/health-issues/conditions/adhd/Pages/Mood-Disorders-ADHD.aspx) such as depression (/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Childhood-Depression-What-Parents-Can-Do-To-Help.aspx) or anxiety.

Depressed people often retreat into themselves, when secretly they're crying out to be rescued. Many times they're too embarrassed to reveal their unhappiness to others, including Mom and Dad. Boys in particular may try to hide their emotions, in the misguided belief that displaying the feeling is a fifty-foot-high neon sign of weakness.

Let's not wait for children or youth to come to us with their problems or concerns. Knock on the door, park yourself on the bed, and say, *"You seem sad. Would you like to talk about it? Maybe I can help."*

2. Listen—even when your teen is not talking.

Not all, but most kids who are thinking about suicide (this is called suicidal ideation) tip off their troubled state of mind through troubled behaviors and actions. Studies have found that one trait common to families affected by a son's or daughter's suicide is poor communication between parents and child. However, there are usually three or more issues or factors going on all at once in a child's life at the time when he or she is thinking about taking his or her life.

These include but are not limited to:

- Major loss (i.e., break up or death)
- Substance use (</English/ages-stages/teen/substance-abuse/Pages/Is-Your-Child-Vulnerable-to-Substance-Abuse.aspx>)
- Peer or social pressure
- Access to weapons (</English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Handguns-in-the-Home.aspx>)
- Public humiliation
- Severe chronic pain
- Chronic medical condition (</English/health-issues/conditions/chronic/Pages/Children-with-Chronic-Illness-Dealing-with-Emotional-Problems-and-Depression.aspx>)
- Impulsiveness/aggressiveness
- Family history of suicide (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Inheriting-Mental-Disorders.aspx>)

If your instinct tells you that a teenager might be a danger to himself, heed your instincts and don't allow him to be left alone. In this situation, it is better to overreact than to underreact. See *How to Communicate With and Listen to Your Teen* (</English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/How-to-Communicate-with-a-Teenager.aspx>).

3. Never shrug off threats of suicide as typical teenage melodrama.

Any written or verbal statement of *"I want to die"* or *"I don't care anymore"* should be treated seriously. Often, children who attempt suicide had been telling their parents repeatedly that they intended to kill themselves. Most research supports that people who openly threaten suicide don't really intend to take their own lives; and that the threat is a desperate plea for help. While that is true much of the time, what mother or father would want to risk being wrong?

Any of these other red flags warrants your immediate attention and action by seeking professional help right away:

- *"Nothing matters."*
- *"I wonder how many people would come to my funeral?"*
- *"Sometimes I wish I could just go to sleep and never wake up."*
- *"Everyone would be better off without me."*
- *"You won't have to worry about me much longer."*

When a teenager starts dropping comments like the ones above or comes right out and admits to feeling suicidal, try not to react with shock (*"What are you, crazy?!"*) or scorn (*"That's a ridiculous thing to say!"*). Above all, don't tell him or her, *"You don't mean that!"* Be willing to listen nonjudgmentally to what he or she is really saying, which is: *"I need your love and attention because I'm in tremendous pain, and I can't seem to stop it on my own."*

To see your child so troubled is hard for any parent. Nevertheless, the immediate focus has to be on consoling; you'll tend to your feelings later. In a calm voice, you might say, "I see. You must really, really be hurting inside."

4. Seek professional help right away.

If your teenager's behavior has you concerned, don't wait to contact your pediatrician. Contact a local mental health provider who works with children to have your child or youth evaluated as soon as possible so that your son or daughter can start therapy or counseling (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/How-Emotional-and-Behavioral-Disorders-are-Treated.aspx>) if he or she is not in danger of self-harm. However, call your local mental health crisis support team or go to your local emergency room if you think your child is actively suicidal and in danger of self-harm.

5. Share your feelings.

Let your teen know he or she is not alone and that everyone feels sad or depressed or anxious now and then, including moms and dads. Without minimizing his anguish, be reassuring that these bad times won't last forever. Things truly will get better and you will help get your child through counseling and other treatment to help make things better for him or her..

6. Encourage your teen not isolate himself or herself from family and friends.

It's usually better to be around other people than to be alone. But don't push if he says no.

7. Recommend exercise.

Physical activity (</English/healthy-living/fitness/Pages/Energy-Out-Daily-Physical-Activity-Recommendations.aspx>) as simple as walking or as vigorous as pumping iron can put the brakes on mild to moderate depression.

There are several theories why:

- Working out causes a gland in the brain to release endorphins, a substance believed to improve mood and ease pain. Endorphins also lower the amount of cortisol in the circulation. Cortisol, a hormone, has been linked to depression.
- Exercise distracts people from their problems and makes them feel better about themselves.
- Experts recommend working out for thirty to forty minutes a day, two to five times per week.
- Any form of exercise will do; what matters most is that children and youth enjoy the activity and continue to do it on a regular basis.

8. Urge your teen not to demand too much of himself or herself.

Until therapy begins to take effect, this is probably not the time to assume responsibilities that could prove overwhelming. Suggest that he or she divide large tasks into smaller, more manageable ones whenever possible and participate in favorite, low-stress activities. The goal is to rebuild confidence and self-esteem (</English/ages-stages/teen/Pages/Ways-To-Build-Your-Teenagers-Self-Esteem.aspx>).

9. Remind your teen who is undergoing treatment not to expect immediate results.

Talk therapy and/or medication usually take time to improve mood. Your child shouldn't become discouraged if he or she doesn't feel better right away.

10. If you keep guns at home ([/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Handguns-in-the-Home.aspx](#)), store them safely or move all firearms elsewhere until the crisis has passed.

- **Fact:** Suicide by firearm among American youth topped a 12-year high in 2013, with most of the deaths involving a gun belonging to a family member, according to a report from the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence. **Any of these deaths may have been prevented if a gun wasn't available.**

If you suspect your child might be suicidal, it is extremely important to keep all firearms, alcohol, and medications under lock and key.

Additional Information:

- [Mental Health and Teens: Watch for Danger Signs \(/English/ages-stages/teen/pages/Mental-Health-and-Teens-Watch-for-Danger-Signs.aspx\)](#)
- [Teen Suicide Statistics \(/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/pages/Teen-Suicide-Statistics.aspx\)](#)
- [Childhood Depression: What Parents Can Do To Help \(/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Childhood-Depression-What-Parents-Can-Do-To-Help.aspx\)](#)

Last Updated 2/3/2016

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