

Helping Someone Who's Suicidal

If you know someone who talks about attempting suicide or shows other signs of being suicidal (see below), do not ignore the behavior. These warning signs provide an opportunity for you to intervene before it's too late.

You can help someone who is threatening suicide by making yourself available, being willing to listen, and showing that you care. Don't act shocked by the threat, judge the person, or dare the person to do it. Take action to remove hazards, such as guns or stockpiled pills. And most important, get help—even if the person has sworn you to secrecy. You can get help by calling a private therapist or counselor, a family physician, a community mental-health agency, or a suicide-prevention or crisis center.

If you are concerned that your friend or family member is in danger of acting on the suicidal thoughts, the best thing to do is to call 911 or take the person to the nearest emergency department for evaluation by a mental health professional. Another option is to call 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433). This nationwide, toll-free number is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for people contemplating suicide or facing an emotional crisis; operators will connect you to a certified crisis center in your area. You can also find a list of crisis centers near you by visiting www.hopeline.com and clicking on the Resource Center link.

Although telling the person that "everything will be okay" may be inappropriate, be reassuring. Let the person know that other people care, help is available, and there is hope.

males and in those who live alone, have made prior suicide attempts, refuse psychiatric evaluation, or abuse alcohol or other drugs. Although women attempt suicide three to four times more often than men, men are three to four times more likely to die by suicide. In addition, a 2002 Swedish study found that older people with a serious physical illness were six times more likely to die by suicide than those without a serious illness.

Up to three quarters of people who die by suicide have visited their medical doctor in the prior month. This suggests that these people were aware that something was wrong but that neither they nor their doctor identified depression as the problem. Although it is impossible to predict accurately who will attempt suicide, there are warning signs that a severely depressed person may make an attempt. All too often, friends and family of people who die by suicide are unaware of the seriousness of the signs until it is too late.

The most important steps to prevent suicide are to recognize the risk factors and warning signs and to facilitate appropriate treatment of the underlying psychiatric illness. Typical warning signs are listed below. However, not all people who die by suicide have these risk factors, and most people who do have them are not suicidal. Signs include the following:

- social isolation that may be self-imposed;