

Suicide Warning Signs 11-3.04-K

IDENTIFY the common warning signs of potential suicide, as presented in the E-PME Study Guide.

Common Warning Signs of Potential Suicide

Unfortunately, suicide is common in virtually all segments of society— young and old, male and female, rich and poor—and in every ethnic group. Suicide claims an estimated 35,000 lives each year, making it among the nation’s ten leading causes of death.

An even more staggering image of the massive problem of suicide emerges when you add to this figure the number of people who attempt suicide—about 280,000 per year.

It is important to openly acknowledge that suicide is a problem in our society. It must be dealt with frankly and openly. As an informed person, you can be a key factor in suicide prevention. Suicide prevention requires the:

- Concern of a friend
- Knowledge to recognize the signs of danger
- Willingness to talk openly and candidly
- Taking the first step to make sure the person gets professional help

Preventive action is necessary if you see any indications of suicide. Be aware of these six distinct signs:

- A suicide threat or some other statement indicating a desire or intention to die
- A previous suicide attempt
- Mental depression
- Marked changes in behavior or personality
- Making arrangements as though for a final departure
- Taking unnecessary risks

Since substance abuse has been linked to several suicides, this can also be a sign of potential suicide. Alcohol is a depressant. If someone who is already depressed starts drinking heavily, this can lead to suicide.

Suicide Threats

Sometimes threats or other statements revealing a person's desire or intention to commit suicide are ignored. Mistakenly, some people believe that an individual who is serious about suicide keeps it quiet. This is not usually true. A person planning to commit suicide:

- Often tells others the plans
- Talks about ending it all or not wanting to go on
- Makes an indirect statement, because it is feared that these thoughts are unacceptable to others
- May hint about plans of suicide in a light manner or disguised as a joke
- May go to the doctor and complain vaguely about feelings, hoping that the doctor will somehow uncover the real reason behind the visit.

Often people contemplating suicide are torn between a will to live and a desire to die. Therefore, they try to let others know about it, hoping that someone will help them. Whether a direct statement or subtle hint reveals intentions, act on this important sign.

Previous Suicide Attempt

People who try to commit suicide may not appear to be very serious about their attempts. For example, they may take a bottle of pills at a time when they are sure to be discovered. They may injure themselves in a way that is not likely to be lethal.

These attempts are a cry for help. Do not ignore it or pass it off lightly. Even if the person who made the attempt makes light of it or tries to explain it away, get professional help.

Some people erroneously dismiss these types of suicide attempts as "just a bid for attention." This does have an element of truth to it as such an attempt calls attention to the person's problem or state of mind. If this cry for help is not answered, another more serious attempt is likely to follow.

Eighty percent of the people who commit suicide have made at least one previous attempt. Accordingly, NEVER dismiss a suicide attempt as insignificant, no matter how harmless or frivolous it seems.

Mental Depression

Any long period of sadness is an indication of a serious depression. This is particularly true when an individual has had some kind of loss. The loss could be of any type – the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, the loss of money or security, or the loss of self-esteem. To outside observers, the individual most often appears anxious and worried. Persons suffering from depression often:

- Have a loss of appetite, sleep disturbances, and physical ailments
- Feel lonely, worthless, guilty, and sad
- Lose interest in friends and activities

Prolonged periods of depression must be professionally treated because of the pain and misery it causes and because of the danger of suicide. Depression accompanied by feelings of hopelessness and by isolation from others is particularly dangerous.

Behavioral Changes

People who are considering suicide often show sudden and noticeable changes in behavior and personality. For example:

- The person who is normally reserved or conservative suddenly becomes loud and conspicuous.
 - The person who is normally outgoing and friendly becomes aloof and wants to be alone.
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Suicide Preparations

Preparations before suicide vary with the person's personality and circumstances. Such preparations usually consist of "getting one's affairs in order."

- The head of the household may prepare a will and review insurance papers.
- A housewife might write long overdue letters and patch up bad feelings with relatives or neighbors.
- Teenagers might give away personal possessions with sentimental value – jewelry, skis, records.
- Final preparations may be made very quickly, with the suicide following abruptly.

Prevention often relies on detection of earlier signs, such as comments about death, depression, and marked personality changes.

Unnecessary Risks

When a person begins taking unnecessary risks seemingly oblivious to the outcome, this could be a potential sign of suicide.

Taking Preventive Action

Seeing any of these signs alone or together with other indicators is an important clue to how a person is feeling and whether suicide is contemplated.

When you see signs, take preventive action. Get help for at-risk persons even if they try to assure you they won't actually take their own lives. You can seek the help of a professional through several sources:

- Coast Guard Employee Assistance Coordinator
- EAP hotline: 1-800-222-0364
- Crisis Intervention Center
- Mental health clinic
- Physician
- Qualified mental health professional
- Hospital emergency room
- Outpatient clinics
- A clergy person/chaplain

Even if the person refuses help, call a suicide prevention center or EAP hotline:

1-800-222-0364

Facing the possibility of embarrassment through overreaction is much easier than facing a person's death because of your failure to act.
