

Suicide Awareness and Prevention Among Youth

By Jason Hosch, PhD

Let's talk about suicide... If you say it's an uncomfortable topic, you're right. It's painful, it's sad, and it's confusing. And it's all the more so if the person we're talking about is a loved one. Directly or indirectly, suicide is the most selfish thing a person can do, affecting those left behind to try to relive those terrible moments and ask "why?" Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. In this article, we will take a look at the increasing occurrence of suicide among our youth. We will also address how to identify the warning signs, and what to do if we spot them.

Suicide has been found to be more common among teens, young adults, and the elderly. It is the second leading cause of death around the world among youth ages 15 – 24, with accidents the first. Bringing it even closer to home, St. Johns County, FL is reported to have the highest rate of suicide in the U.S. relative to the national average. In fact, just in the past several months, 7 teens in St. Johns County are reported to have killed themselves. And no one saw it coming.

So what are the red flags of suicide risk and how do we recognize them before it's too late? There are certain groups that are more at risk, with factors involving health, environment, and history. These include those individuals who are depressed, who experience mental disorders, who are exposed to abuse, who are involved in substance abuse, who have been exposed to a family history of suicide, who have made previous suicide attempts, and those struggling with gender identity issues. LGBTQ youth, for example, have been found to be at least 4 times more likely to attempt suicide than other young people. And then there is social media which has in some ways played an insidious part in exploiting youth at risk. Suicide games like the "Blue Whale Challenge" and "Momo" challenge kids to kill themselves and live stream the act. At least 130 teens are said to have killed themselves playing these games.

Other warning signs relate to talk, mood, and behavior. The person may talk about killing themselves, about feeling hopeless, feeling trapped, having no reason to live, being a burden to others, or experiencing unbearable pain. They may show signs of depression, including long-lasting sadness, mood swings, irritability, fatigue, loss of interests, and/or unexpected rage. Suddenly becoming calm after a period of depression or moodiness can be a scary sign that the person has made a decision to end his or her life. Certain behaviors may also signal risk, especially if related to a painful event, loss, or change in the person's life. These may include withdrawal from others, sleep problems, fatigue,

aggression, increased use of alcohol or drugs, looking for ways to end their life and making preparations, changes in personality and/or appearance, and dangerous or self-harmful behavior.

It's important that you speak up if you see any of these signs. 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 socially isolated. Don't be afraid to ask them if they are depressed or thinking about suicide. Ask if they are seeing a therapist or taking medication. Rather than trying to talk the person out of suicide, let them know that depression is temporary and treatable. 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 them to seek professional help.

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If you believe the person is in immediate danger of killing themselves, do the following: do not leave them alone. If possible, ask for help from friends or other family members. Ask them to give you any weapons they might have. Take away or remove sharp objects or anything else that they could use to hurt themselves. If they are already in psychiatric treatment, help them to contact the doctor or therapist for guidance and help. Try to keep them as calm as possible. And call 911 or take them to an emergency room.

These are just some tips for identifying, assessing, and acting to mitigate suicide risk. Be proactive and keep the lines of communication open with your child. Know that you also have a right and a responsibility to know what they are doing with their technology, including their phones and their use of social media. If in doubt, err on the side of caution. Be a source of faith, hope, and love for those in need.



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