

Suicide Warning Signs

A. General Warning Signs

- 1) Acting out: aggressive, hostile behavior, sexual promiscuity
- 2) Alcohol and other drug use
 - a. Almost 50% were drunk or high before suicide
 - b. 85% of attempters were drunk or high before attempt
- 3) Passive behavior-lethargy
- 4) Change in eating habits
- 5) Changes in sleeping habits
- 6) Fear of separation

B. Specific Warning Signs

- 1) Abrupt changes in personality
- 2) Sudden mood swings
- 3) Risky behavior
- 4) Decreased interest in school and poor grades
- 5) Inability to concentrate
- 6) Loss or lack of friends

C. Final Distress Signals

- 1) Loss of an important person or thing
- 2) Hopelessness
- 3) Obsession with death, suicide talk
- 4) Making a will, giving away prized possessions

The Mythology of Suicide

- 1) Myth People who talk about killing themselves rarely commit suicide.

Fact Most people who commit suicide have given some verbal clue or warning about their intentions. 29% of individuals who commit suicide disclosed the intent to someone.
- 2) Myth The tendency toward suicide is inherited and passed from generation to generation.

Fact Although suicidal behavior does run in families, it does not appear to be transmitted genetically. Approximately 2% of individuals that commit suicide have had a family member commit suicide in the previous five years.
- 3) Myth The suicidal person wants to die and feels there is no turning back.

Fact Suicidal people are usually ambivalent about dying and frequently will seek help immediately after attempting to harm themselves. For teens and young adults, there are an estimated 100 to 200 attempts for every suicide. For the elderly, there are an estimated 4 attempts for every suicide.
- 4) Myth All suicidal people are deeply depressed.

Fact Although depression is often closely associated with suicidal feelings, not all people who kill themselves are obviously depressed. In fact, some suicidal people appear to be happier than they've been in years because they have decided to 'resolve' all of their problems by killing themselves. An estimated 44% of individuals that commit suicide have a current depressed mood.
- 5) Myth There is no correlation between alcoholism and suicide.

Fact Alcoholism and suicide often go hand in hand. Alcoholics are prone to suicidal behavior and even people who don't normally drink will often ingest alcohol shortly before killing themselves. 18% of the individuals that commit suicide are identified as having an alcohol problem. 33% were positive for alcohol and 16% were positive for opiates.

- 6) Myth Suicidal people are mentally ill.
- Fact Psychological autopsy studies suggest that 90 to 95% of individuals that commit suicide have a diagnosable psychiatric disorder. Among the most frequently cited are mood disorders, impulse control disorders, alcohol/substance use disorder, psychosis, personality disorders, and conduct disorder.
- 7) Myth Once someone attempts suicide, that person will always entertain thoughts of suicide.
- Fact Most people who are suicidal are so for only a very brief period once in their lives. If the attempter receives the proper assistance and support, he/she will probably never be suicidal again.
- 8) Myth If you ask someone about his/her suicidal intentions, you'll only be encouraging him/her to kill himself/herself.
- Fact Actually the opposite is true. Asking someone directly about suicidal intent will often lower his/her anxiety level and act as a deterrent to suicidal behavior by encouraging the ventilation of pent-up emotions through a frank discussion of his/her problems.
- 9) Myth Suicide is quite common among the poor.
- Fact Suicide crosses all socioeconomic distinctions and no one economic level is more susceptible to it than another. Unemployment, limited education, homelessness, and contact with the police or justice system are all risk factors.
- 10) Myth Suicidal people rarely seek medical attention.
- Fact Research has consistently shown that about 75% of elderly suicidal people will visit their physician within the month before they kill themselves. For all age groups, 45% of individuals who commit suicide have contacted their physician within one month of killing themselves.
- 11) Myth Suicide is basically a problem that is limited to the young.
- Fact While the number of youth suicides is highest, suicides rates rise with age and reach their highest levels among white males in their seventies or eighties.

- 12) Myth When a depressed person improves, there is the most danger of suicide.
Fact There are no studies that track symptoms and suicide rates. The belief that suicide rates increase as depressed mood lessens appeared in writing for the first time in 1812. The theory passed down through the generations that deeply depressed individuals don't have the energy to commit suicide. One study by Simon and Savarino (2007) that examined treatment in 100,000 patients treated with anti-depressants found that the attempt rate was highest the month before treatment, second highest the month after treatment, and suicide attempt rates declined thereafter.
- 13) Myth Suicide is a spontaneous activity that occurs without warning.
Fact Most suicidal people plan their self-destruction in advance and then present clues indicating that they have become suicidal. 34% of individuals that think about suicide make a plan. 72% of persons with a suicide plan make an attempt. 26% of individuals thinking about suicide make an unplanned attempt.
- 14) Myth Because it includes the Christmas season, December has a high suicide rate.
Fact There is no rash of suicides at Christmas and December has the lowest suicide rate of any month. The months with the highest frequency of suicides are May and June.
- 15) Myth Suicide is a recent phenomenon.
Fact Suicide occurred even in Biblical times (e.g. Judas, Samson, Saul, etc.). A review of suicide rates in the 20th century suggests that suicide rates are relatively stable over time. The suicide rate in 1900 was 10.2 per 100,000 and in 1999 the rate was 10.6 per 100,000. The highest rate was 18.6 in 1932 and the lowest rate was 9.6 in 1957. With a few exceptions, the rate ranged from 10.2 to 12.7 per 100,000.
- 16) Myth Because they don't like to disfigure themselves, women seldom use guns to commit suicide.
Fact While poisoning is the most common method. Women use firearms 30% of the time. Firearms, poisoning, and suffocation account for 91% of the suicide methods used by women.
- 17) Myth Suicide is a result of chronic problems.
Fact Life stressors play an important role. 29% of individuals that commit suicide have had a crisis in the two weeks before. 11% were having difficulty at work. 10% were having a criminal legal problem. 4% were having a non-criminal legal problem. 12% were having a financial problem.

Determining Suicide Potential

Exercise

The more information you have, the easier it is to determine who may be potentially suicidal and how serious a person may be who is thinking about or threatening to commit suicide.

Using the scale below, rate the seriousness of the suicide potential for each of the following situations:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
LEAST SERIOUS			MODERATE				MOST SERIOUS		

Choose the number that best corresponds to the risk involved and write it in the space provided after each situation. Take no more than 20 minutes to complete this exercise.

1. Sam, 14 years old, is just barely passing his subjects at school. His performance started to decline four months ago when his parents divorced. This was also the time he began drinking beer but always at home, alone, and when his mother was gone. The second time his mother caught him drinking beer, she took him to a counselor. Subsequently his father also talked to him. Sam was always willing to answer questions although he listened more than he talked to the counselor or his parents.

Rating _____

2. "My mother makes me so mad," Sheila told her girlfriend. "I just feel like hanging myself in her bedroom so she'd never forget what she does to me."

"Yeah, wouldn't that be the kicker," Theresa said jokingly.

Rating _____

3. Joe was a good student, a decent boy. Two weeks ago he failed to make the basketball team. Like a good kid he joked about it. "Win some, lose some," he said.

One week ago, his girlfriend of four months broke off their relationship for someone else. "There are plenty of others out there," he told his friend. "When have you seen me without two girls?" he quipped with confidence.

His father called him a resilient kid. His mother called him mature. His friends admired his spirit. Yesterday Joe came to school with some of his records and sci-fi books he collected over the years and gave them away to friends. "I don't need them anymore," he said, "You guys enjoy them." "If only all the kids were like Joe," one of his teachers commented in the teacher's lounge later that day."

Rating _____

4. Susie was clearly depressed. She even looked sad. "Everyone would just be better off without me," Susie tells a friend. "Don't be silly. It'll get better Susie. Remember, that's what you told me last year when I was having a hard time."

Rating _____

5. Steve was always hard to handle. The past two months he kept his fights confined to kids his own age. This past week, however, he turned on his father twice for some stupid reason he couldn't remember. His dad wasn't a man of words until the last fight. "I've had it with you kid. You try that shit again and mother or no mother, you're out of this house for good."

Rating _____

6. Gail is an 18-year old, average student. The past few weeks she has been sent to the school nurse multiple times for headaches. At other times the teacher had noticed her daydreaming. Both behaviors are new. When Gail was asked if something was wrong, she would say, "Oh, nothing. I'm ok."

Rating _____

7. There's a lot of trouble at Jake's home. After school one night he takes up his friends' offer to smoke some weed. "My old lady and old man don't give a shit about me. All they care about is themselves," he tells his buddies. Soon after Jake hears his mother, "If it weren't for the kid I would have been gone years ago", the mother yelled at his mother while they were having a fight last night. He tells his friends this and they tell him all parents are like that.

Jake says he feels he just can't take it anymore. One of his friends knows Jake's dad is a hunter and has guns in the house. He is alert enough to get serious and walks home with Jake to talk with him. Jake promises not to do anything dumb. "They ain't worth it," his friend tells him. "I know," Jake says, "Besides I hate guns." "I'll be okay," he reassures his friend, "my parents are taking off on vacation for a week, but I'll be okay."

Rating _____

8. Claude had a period when everything seemed to go wrong. School was hard for him but he was making progress. He had made a few indirect references about dying during this time but never acted on them. He was now finally coming out of it and had started participating in different activities and taking an interest in friends again.

Rating _____

9. Pat's father is a city executive. His mother works for a technology company. Pat is the only boy. He has two sisters already in college: one in law school and the other majoring in engineering. He's on his way to college next year after being an honor student for four years. He's definitely is not a "jock" but is a "whiz" with computers. He's not anti-social, but preoccupied with his studies. Most of his time is spent at home where his parents see to it he has all the time he wants to study.

In return for his dedication, they see to it he doesn't have to worry about chores and earning money. "That kid of ours is going places," his father tells his mother.

Rating _____

10. Jason is eight years old. He had recently been punished by his mother for starting a fire in the garage. His mother is now dating a man who has two well-behaved young sons from his previous marriage. Jason didn't like this man or his sons, but didn't feel he could tell his mother about this. She had taken care of Jason by herself for three years. Her frustrations got the best of her last night and she exploded. Jason ran away. He was found four hours later and returned, but wouldn't talk.

Rating _____

Suicide Intervention Plan

Steps I will follow:

Contact Persons:

Other Resources:

Contract

I _____ agree to enter into the following contract.

- 1) I agree not to make an attempt on my life until _____.
- 2) I agree I will not inflict any bodily injury upon myself until _____.
- 3) I agree I will not engage in any activity that will place my life in jeopardy until _____.
- 4) If I become depressed and am considering suicide, I agree to contact _____ . If this is not possible, I will make every effort to seek appropriate help.

Signature

Witness

Date

Date

**Assessing the Potential Danger of Suicide Risks
S.L.A.P. Method**

1) Simplicity of detail

2) Lethality of method

3) Availability of means

4) Provision for rescue