

Understanding Suicide

Why People Attempt Suicide: Escaping the Flames

The belief that most people who commit suicide have in common is that it is the ONLY solution to their unbearable situation. Many of us have etched in our memories the images of people jumping out of the World Trade Center on 9/11. These people did not want to die. They were leaping to get away from the flames at their back. In a similar manner, people who contemplate suicide are trying to escape some type of peril in their own lives. It is difficult for many of us to truly appreciate the flames that consume the minds of people who contemplate suicide.

The unbearable psychological pain often blocks the ability to see other potential solutions to problems. A pervasive sense of hopelessness stifles the ability to seek help, and yet most people are very ambivalent about taking their lives – they don't want death, they just want the pain to stop.

People often need to feel that they belong to something larger than themselves, and when they do – through an intimate relationship, a faith community, a school, a neighborhood – these relationships can often serve as a buffer through hard times. Thus, many people can experience suicide desire, but never act on these feelings, because they are connected to family and friends within a community.

Suicide Facts

Fact: Suicide happens much more often than most people are aware, about one every sixteen minutes.

Fact: Bringing up the subject of suicide and discussing it openly is one of the most helpful things you can do because it relieves the suicidal person of the incredible sense of isolation they experience. Asking about suicide relays that another person has insight to their pain and cares about their well-being.

Fact: Almost all people who eventually die by suicide have given some clue or warning. When suicidal threats are not taken seriously, the person may conclude that no one cares.

Fact: Most suicidal people are ambivalent, wavering until the very last moment between wanting to live and wanting to die.

Fact: There are almost always warning signs, but others are often unaware of their significance or do not know what to do. Agitated depression (feeling simultaneously highly anxious and despondent) and intense insomnia can be warning signs that are evident to friends and family.

Fact: Sometimes a suicidal person can appear calm and serene right before a suicide attempt is made because the suicidal person has come to peace with his or her decision.

This state could be a sign of imminent danger, especially if the person has not been receiving professional care.

Fact: The suicide rate among youth has increase by 500% since 1950. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth. One in 12 adolescents makes at least one suicide attempt by age 18.

Fact: Approximately 90% of adolescent suicide attempts involve alcohol sue at the time of the attempt.

Fact: 90% of youth who attempt suicide first tell friends about their intent, almost none tell parents or teachers.

1. References: NAMI, Yellow Ribbon, Indiana Suicide Prevention Coalition

WARNING SIGNS

- Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself
- Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or buying a gun
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings
- Giving away possessions

RISK FACTORS

- Previous suicide attempt
- Problems with school or the law
- Breakup of a romance
- Unexpected pregnancy
- A stressful family life. (having parents who are depressed or are substance abusers, or a family history of suicide
- Loss of security...fear of authority, peers, group or gang members
- Stress due to new situations; college or relocating to a new community
- Failing in school or failing to pass an important test
- A serious illness or injury to oneself

- Seriously injuring another person or causing another person's death (example: automobile accident)
- Major loss...of a loved one, a home, divorce in the family, a trauma, a relationship

When Someone is Suicidal

What To Do

1. Stay with the person and ask about suicide directly:
 - Ask: “Sometimes when people feel sad, they have thoughts of harming or killing themselves. Have you had such thoughts?”
 - “Are you thinking of about killing yourself?”
 - “Are you considering suicide?”
 - Contrary to popular belief, asking about suicide doesn’t put ideas into people’s head.
 - Ask about the person’s thoughts. Ask about the plan, method and means – are they lethal? Available?
2. Listen!
 - Try to remain calm. In most instances there is no rush. Focus on listening and understanding.
 - Reflect back feelings and paraphrase: “What I hear you say is that you are in a great deal of pain and feel hopeless.”
 - “Let me see if I am understanding this correctly...”
 - Encourage problem solving and positive actions, but don’t try to take away or minimize their pain. Encourage them to refrain from making any serious, irreversible decisions while in a crisis.
 - Listen with respect. Suicidal people very often need understanding and care.
 - Tell them: “I don’t want you to die.”
 - Tell them: “I will hold onto the hope for you until you can feel it too.”
 - Take all suicide threats seriously. Listen and express concern in a nonjudgmental way.
 - Show that you care.
3. Get or call help immediately!
 - Take charge and take action. Don’t worry about invading their privacy – suicide prevention is your business and often suicidal people have such tunnel vision they are unable to take action for themselves. Don’t leave it up to them to get help.
 - If the crisis is acute, treat it as an emergency and call:
 - the suicide prevention lifeline **1-800-273-TALK (8255)**,
 - Bowen Center **1-800-342-5653**
 - the person’s counselor or general practitioner,
 - **911** or take the person to an emergency room.

- You would intervene if someone were having a heart attack – a suicidal impulse can be just as deadly.
- Get assistance. Avoid trying to be the sole lifeline for the person. Seek out resources even if it means breaking a confidence.

What Not To Do

- Do not keep it a secret.
- Do not sidestep the issue or treat it lightly.
- Do not leave the person alone.
- Do not offer simple solutions.
- Do not judge or tell the person they will go to Hell.
- Do not offer or suggest drugs or alcohol.
- Do not try to be a therapist. Get professional help.

Surviving After Suicide

Traumatic Grief – The Initial Impact

Symptoms of trauma often experienced after suicide

1. Shattered sense of order and trust
2. Increased feelings of vulnerability
3. Difficulty sleeping and eating
4. Disorientation – feeling like you are in a fog
5. Flashbacks or intrusive recollections of the trauma
6. Nightmares
7. Uncontrollable crying or intense anger
8. Feeling numb
9. Denial and disbelief

Beyond Surviving

No two people will grieve in the same way. Some will find support groups helpful; others may rely on friends' support. Some may turn to books; others may go to therapy. Some may take weeks to get back to “normal life”; others may find that life as they remember it no longer exists and they need to redefine themselves.

People feel a range of emotions in the aftermath of suicide – not everyone will go through all of these experiences and the length of each may differ, but these are common emotional reactions that often come like a tidal wave unexpectedly and repeatedly.

- Guilt and self-blame for not being able to prevent the suicide
- Anger at the person who died, at the world, at God, at yourself
- Experiencing suicidal thoughts yourself

- Depression and incredible sadness triggered by anything from major life milestones to a song on the radio
- During the healing process, it is important to be patient with yourself and take each day as it comes. Surround yourself with caring people who do not try to fix things, but just listen without judgment. Set limits and postpone any major decisions if you can during this time. Basic self-care—eating, sleeping, hydration—are very important to feeling more stable and better able to handle the intense emotions. Avoid alcohol abuse and other mood altering substances—while they may alleviate the pain in the short-run, they tend to exacerbate depression and pain in the long run.

Coping with Holidays, Anniversaries and Birthdays: New Traditions and Healing Rituals

With an empty chair around the table, important celebrations can be particularly hard for suicide survivors. Before the holiday arrives, talk with the family about the expectations and consider creating some new traditions. For some, it may be better to be all together while others might prefer to be by themselves. Usually the anticipation of the holiday is worse than the actual day. There is not a right way to approach these days – find a way that works for you.

The death anniversary can also be a difficult time for survivors. Many find comfort in participating in some form of healing ritual of remembrance to honor the life of the loved one. Rituals serve many purposes for the suicide survivors. They make changes manageable and mark transitions. Rituals communicate values and beliefs while providing containment for strong emotions. The power of rituals comes from the fact that they often provoke deep emotional experiences that hold a level of meaning that words cannot capture.

These practices may be done alone or with others:

- Plant a memorial garden or tree.
- Dove release or balloon release.
- Candle lighting ceremony.
- Write a poem or letter and release it to the universe by burning it.

Helping Survivors of Suicide: What Can You Do?

Suicide survivors often suffer in silence. People often feel uncomfortable dealing with death in general, and helping someone through the aftermath of suicide often increases these feelings manifold. Helping your friend or family member through this tragedy may be the most important thing you can do – by taking action you will help lessen the social stigma the survivors are experiencing and move them toward eventual healing.

Things to consider when helping suicide survivors:

- Ask the survivor what you can do to help and do it. During the acute aftermath phase you can help them in many concrete ways:
 - Keep a list of phone calls, visitors, and people who bring food and gifts
 - Help keep the mail straight – bills, cards, newspaper notices
 - Offer to make calls to people they wish to notify
 - Help with errands – walk the dog, shop for food
 - Offer to help with documentation – for insurance, newspapers, services
 - Write down a story or create a collage of photos about the deceased
 - The emotional intensity of the grief is great. Survivors may need to talk, cry, scream, or sit silently for hours at a time. Repetition is part of healing.
 - Listening with your heart and without judgment is most helpful. You do not need to take the pain away; your presence helps contain it.
 - Use the deceased's name and ask for and tell stories – hearing the name and remembering can be comforting to the survivor.
 - Don't worry about saying the wrong things; just concentrate on what is being shared with you. Think of yourself as someone who is walking with the survivor not in front or behind.
 - Give them permission to grieve.
 - Clichés such as “Everything has a reason” and “Time heals all wounds” are not helpful at this time.
 - Be patient – grief takes its own course and may go on for a long time. Often the support is most needed after the initial chaos of the trauma has diminished.
 - Be mindful of holidays, birthdays and anniversaries.
 - Avoid statements like, “I know how you feel” – everyone goes through this in a different way.

1. American Association of Suicidology
2. American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
3. www.survivorsofsuicide.com
4. “Beyond Surviving: Suggestions for Survivors” by Iris Bolton

C o p i n g S t r a t e g i e s f o r T e e n s

Spend time with family and friends.	Get involved with after-school activities.
Volunteer - you have a lot to offer.	Think and plan your future. Set realistic goals.
Try to be open with your feelings.	Write your feelings and thought in your journal or diary.
Read books & subjects that uplift you.	Laugh ~ keep your sense of humor!
Consider the importance of spirituality in your life.	Accept other's thanks, compliments toward you, and praise for you.
Eat right! - - - Chocolate is good!	Exercise regularly.
Do not tolerate physical, emotional, or sexual abuse from anyone. Get help immediately!	Seek help if you feel overwhelmed or troubled.