

Understanding and Helping the Suicidal Person

Be Aware of the Warning Signs

There is no typical suicide victim. It happens to young and old, rich and poor. Fortunately there are some common warning signs which, when acted upon, can save lives. Here are some signs to look for:

A person might be suicidal if he or she:

- Talks about committing suicide or may have attempted suicide in the past.
- Has trouble eating or sleeping and may lose interest in their personal appearance.
- Experiences drastic changes in behavior and may take unnecessary risks.
- Withdraws from friends and/or social activities.
- Loses interest in hobbies, work, school, etc.
- Prepares for death by making out a will and final arrangements.
- Gives away prized possessions.
- Has had recent severe losses.
- Is preoccupied with death and dying.
- Increases their use of alcohol or drugs.

What to Do

Here are some ways to be helpful to someone who is threatening suicide:

- Be direct. Talk openly and matter-of-factly about suicide.
- Be willing to listen. Allow expressions of feelings. Accept the feelings.
- Be non-judgmental. Don't debate whether suicide is right or wrong, or that feelings are good or bad. Don't lecture on the value of life.
- Get involved. Become available. Show interest and support.
- Don't dare him or her to do it.
- Don't act shocked. This will put distance between you.
- Don't be sworn to secrecy. Seek support.
- Offer hope that alternatives are available but do not offer glib reassurance.
- Take action. Remove means, such as guns or stockpiled pills.
- Get help from persons or agencies specializing in crisis intervention and suicide prevention.

Be Aware of Feelings

Many people at some time in their lives think about committing suicide. Most decide to live, because they eventually come to realize that the crisis is temporary and death is permanent. On the other hand, people having a crisis sometimes perceive their dilemma as inescapable and feel an utter loss of control. These are some of the feeling and things they experience:

- Can't stop the pain and the future may seem hopeless.
- Can't think clearly and may have a hard time in making decisions.
- Can't sleep, eat or work.
- Can't make the sadness go away and may feel very depressed.
- Can't see themselves as worthwhile.
- Can't get someone's attention.
- Can't seem to get control.

If you experience these feelings, get help! If someone you know exhibits these symptoms, offer help!

Contact the nearest suicide crisis center (call information and ask) or try one of the following:

- A community mental health agency or hospital emergency room.
- A private therapist, counselor or psychologist.
- A family physician or minister.