

Youth at Risk Warning Signs

Youth give a range of signs and exhibit a variety of behaviors that can signal adults that they're struggling and may be overwhelmed.

Many of the warning signs listed here can indicate that a youth is depressed, is suicidal, or perhaps simply overwhelmed and without the skills to cope. Many youth who are suicidal are *also* depressed and treating only one of the two is not enough. Don't hesitate to ask for help from trained mental health workers. Youth need our help when they're overwhelmed.

GENERAL RED FLAGS

Behaviors of Concern

- Previous suicide attempt (single biggest indicator of a completed suicide to come)
- Giving Clues (90% of kids who suicide give many clues)
- Make poor choices about safety (no seat belt, no condoms, etc.)
- Hospitalized (especially for consequence of living dangerously, for depression, or other mental health issues)
- Long-term depression
- Listening to depressive or violent music
- Writing about depressive or violent behavior
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Difficulty waking up, tired all day
- Can't eat enough or eating too much
- Feeling "blue" for more than 2 weeks
- Loss of interest in usual activities
- Crying spells for no apparent reason
- Problems sleeping
- Trouble focusing or concentrating
- Difficulty making decisions
- Unintentional weight gain or loss
- Restlessness
- Feeling fatigued or weak
- Cutting themselves or self-mutilation
- Panic attacks, night terrors
- Increased acting-out behaviors
- Change in peer group
- Hopeless, powerless, out of control language
- Sudden focus on everyone but themselves
- Radical change in personality
- Increased drug / alcohol abuse

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Feelings of Concern

- Feeling worthless
- Feeling easily annoyed
- Feeling hopeless
- Irritability
- Feelings sad or down
- Feeling life is not worth living
- Feeling isolated or alone
- Feeling underserving
- Feeling overwhelmed or stymied
- Feeling like the world is against them
- Feeling agitated
- Feeling “in a fog”
- Feeling a loss of energy, motivation
- Feelings of guilt
- Unexplained feelings of shame

Specific to Depression

- Difficulty concentrating
- Overwhelmed by sadness, lasting weeks
- Increase in acting-out behaviors
- Use of drugs or alcohol to try to cope
- Recurrent nightmares
- Loss of interest in usual pleasures
- Withdrawn or self-isolating behaviors
- Eating disorders
- Cutting, self-mutilation, self-abuse
- Loss of self-esteem
- Listless, directionless, “lost” in life
- Sleep disturbances or sleepy all the time
- Marked changes in behavior
- Physical fatigue
- Anxiety, fear, irritability
- Significant weight gain or loss

If you are concerned that someone is at immediate risk of suicide, call mental health, your local hospital, or 911 to get support. Don't leave them alone! Don't try to handle it alone!

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Specific to Suicide

- Giving away possessions, closing of affairs
- Talking excessively about death, funerals
- Helpless, hopeless language, behaviors
- Preoccupations with death music and death art
- Often write about it; journals, social media, etc.
- Poor choices about safety, risky behavior
- Withdrawn, self-isolating
- No hope, no future plans
- A suicide attempt is the biggest warning sign

Language Youth May Use

- *"I think about killing myself."*
- *"Life isn't worth living."*
- *"You won't be seeing me any more."*
- *"I have to do this my way."*
- *"I can't go on."*
- *"You'll be sorry when I'm gone."*
- *"I hate my life."*
- *"I'm going to kill myself."*
- *"I wish I could just go to sleep and never wake up."*

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Truths About Suicide

- No one person or event can cause a suicide, and no one person can prevent one.
- The tendency to blame is related to an incredible need to understand **why**. Although understandable, blame is not helpful to yourself or others.
- Suicide is more about thinking errors than emotions. Remember that traditional counseling and parenting techniques won't work. Get trained, expert help.
- Being direct in confronting / talking about suicide is effective. Hinting, probing, advising, ignoring, and judging aren't.
- Suicide is brought on by multi-dimensional problems over time. The recovery process is lengthy and involves whole families and outside support systems.
- Anger, guilt, and feeling terribly hurt are common reactions to suicide. Recover is often helped by joining with others who have also experienced a suicide.
- Children in families who have experienced suicide need extra special support and are often "forgotten grievers." Outside support is helpful — families can rarely grieve and support their children enough at the same time.
- Listen to people in grief and pain. Don't advise. Don't say you understand. Don't give platitudes. Just be willing to listen.
- Bring up the subject with family members. Helpful phrases might be:
 - *"I'm feeling so badly for you I just don't know what to say."*
 - *"I'm so sorry this happened to you."*
 - *"What is the most painful part?"*
 - *"What could I do for you right now?"*

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