

# Preventing youth suicide: Risk Factors and Warning Signs

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-8255 (TALK)

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among school age youth. However, **suicide is preventable**. Youth who are contemplating suicide frequently give warning signs of their distress. Parents, teachers, and friends are in a key position to pick up on these signs and get help. Most important is to never take these warning signs lightly or promise to keep them secret.

**Suicide Risk Factors** *Although far from perfect predictors, certain characteristics are associated with increased odds of having suicidal thoughts. These include:*

- Mental illness including depression, conduct disorders, and substance abuse
- Family stress/dysfunction
- Environmental risks, including presence of a firearm in the home and unsecured prescription medications
- Situational crises (e.g., traumatic death of a loved one, physical or sexual abuse, family violence)

**Suicide Warning Signs** *Most suicidal youth demonstrate observable behaviors that signal their suicidal thinking. These include:*

- Suicidal threats in the form of direct ("I am going to kill myself") and indirect ("I wish I could fall asleep and never wake up again") statements
- Suicide notes and plans (including online postings)
- Prior suicidal behavior
- Making final arrangements (e.g., making funeral arrangements, writing a will, giving away prized possessions)
- Preoccupation with death
- Changes in behavior, appearance, thoughts and/or feelings

**What to Do** *Youth who feel suicidal are not likely to seek help directly; however, parents, school personnel, and peers can recognize the warning signs and take immediate action to keep the youth safe. When a youth gives signs that they may be considering suicide, the following actions should be taken:*

- Remain calm
- Ask the youth directly if he or she is thinking about suicide (e.g., "Are you thinking of suicide?")
- Focus on your concern for their well-being and avoid being accusatory
- Listen; Do not judge
- Reassure them that there is help and they will not feel like this forever
- Provide constant supervision. Do not leave the youth alone
- Remove means for self-harm, (i.e. medications and firearms etc.)
- **Get help:** Parents should seek help from community mental health resources as soon as possible

