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# **Suicide Awareness for Parents**

# Youth Suicide Statistics

- Suicide is the **2nd** leading cause of death among young adults in Washington State
  - Youth suicide rate is 10% higher than the national average
  - 2 in 7 youth have symptoms of depression in Snohomish County
- On average, each week in Washington
  - Two youth kill themselves
  - There are 17 youth hospitalizations because of a suicide attempt

# Myths About Suicide

- Talking about suicide may give the person the idea
- It doesn't happen to people like us
- You can't stop it
- People who talk about it don't do it
- Most attempts are just to get attention
- Once the person starts feeling better, the risk goes away

# Suicide: Why?

- Suicide is not event driven
- Suicide is a response to intense emotional pain
  - Grief / Loss
  - Feeling like a burden
  - Feeling alienated
  - Depression / Anxiety
  - Hopelessness

# Top Reasons Teens Give for Having Suicidal Thoughts or Intent

- Trauma and abuse – past and present
- Real or imagined pressure to be “perfect”
- School Failure
- Bullying
- Not being accepted for who they are
- Not feeling cared for or loved
- Addiction
  - Cutting
  - Drugs / Alcohol
  - Eating Disorders

# Youth Brain Differences

- The brain of most adolescents will not reach full development until age 25 – this makes the way they think unique
- Effects on thought and behavior
  - Unstable mood
  - Trouble establishing cause and effect or making predictions
  - Difficulty understanding the consequences of actions
  - Impulsivity/risk taking
  - Rely less on experience and memory when making decisions

# Youth Brain Differences

- Teens have less ability to correctly identify emotion in others (looking at facial expressions)
  - Increases the likelihood that teens will interpret their parents as more angry than the parents actually feel
  - Increases the chance the teen will believe their parents will be angry if they mention suicide

# Why They Do Not Ask For help

- Fear that school counselors will tell their parents
- Parents don't "think anything is wrong with me. They tell me to 'get over it' and think I'm just looking for attention"
- I don't want people to "freak out"
- I don't want to be taken to the hospital



# Why They Don't Ask For Help

- It will make things worse for my family
- I don't want to scare my mom and make her cry
- No one cares about me
- They (parents and counselors) don't know the "real" me. They only see the happy person I pretend to be
  - Connected to the pressure to be perfect

# RISK FACTOR or WARNING SIGN?

## What's the Difference?

- **Risk factors** indicate the teen is at greater risk for a suicidal crisis (ideation, attempt, and/or completion) than other teens who do not have the risk factor(s) in question. The greater number of risk factors present, the greater the chance the youth will become suicidal
- **Warning signs** tell us that a suicidal crisis may be in progress. The youth may already have a plan and intend to act on it

# Risk Factors

- Mental health disorders: Bipolar, depression, anxiety, OCD, Schizophrenia, & certain personality disorders
- Substance use
- Poor coping skills
- Feeling alienated
- Impulsivity / Aggressiveness
- History of trauma or abuse
- Grief / Loss
- Easy Access to lethal means
- Lack of protective factors
- History of past attempts
- Family history of suicide / mental illness

# Warning Signs

- Detailed plans
- Talking about a desire to die or kill oneself
- Investigating or collecting means (internet searches, collecting pills)
- Expressed feelings of hopelessness, feeling trapped, or talk of unbearable emotional pain
- Talking about being a burden
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Appearing anxious, agitated, or acting reckless
- Sleeping changes
- Withdrawing and isolating
- Expressed rage or revenge talk
- Extreme mood swings

# Protective Factors

- Restricted access to highly lethal means
- Feeling safe asking for help
- Access to mental health services (therapy / counseling and medication or either alone)
- Skills in problem solving, conflict resolution, & coping with problems in a non-violent way
- Cultural & religious beliefs
- Natural supports

# Is Suicide Contagious

- The short answer: Yes and No
- Studies indicate the youth at risk for suicide contagion are youth already at risk for suicide
- After a peer suicide, those at greatest risk are youth who:
  - Have a history of attempts
  - Are already dealing with stressful life events
  - Are preoccupied with thoughts of death and dying
  - Have experienced other losses
- The closer the relationship to the person who died, the greater potential for negative impact
- Respond to risk factors and warning signs and seek help if you are concerned

# Possible Reactions to a Suicidal Crisis

## PARENT

- Panic and anxiety
- Fear
- Denial
- Helpless

## YOUTH

- Panic and anxiety
- Fear
- Helpless and hopeless
- I must be crazy to have thoughts of suicide

# Basic Components of Suicide Intervention/Prevention

- Information from the Maine Suicide Prevention website
  - Show you care
  - Listen carefully
  - Ask about suicide
  - Ask directly in a caring non-confrontational way
  - Get help
  - Stay with the person, call the crisis line for guidance



# Creating a Safe Environment to Discuss Suicide

- Manage your own reactions to suicide
  - Be self-aware
  - Understand how what you say impacts your child
    - Don't make them feel stupid, crazy, or like a burden
- Maintain a collaborative relationship
  - **Listen** thoroughly to your child's story to attain a shared understanding (empathy) of his/her suicidality and the reason they think suicide will help
  - Accept your child's feelings without judgment

# Ways to Ask

- Ask early
- Ask directly:
  - Are you thinking about suicide
  - You look really down. Sometimes when people are sad they have thoughts of suicide. Are you having any thoughts of suicide
  - Sometimes when people are (fill in the blank) they are thinking of suicide. Are you

# Why Talking About Suicide Helps

- Talking helps the person think about new ways to see their situation and to see how their feelings connect
- Negative emotions can be released by talking about why dying by suicide sounds like a solution
- People learn about their feelings by hearing themselves talk
- It relieves internal stress and pressure

# What to Do

- You don't have to assess your child alone
  - Call the crisis line for 24/7 consultation with a Mental Health Professional
- Reassure your child you are going to help them and you are not disappointed or angry with them
- It is good to show concern and emotion, but stay in control – take charge and do not allow fear or denial to defeat you

# Making the Environment Safe

- Ask if they have a suicide plan and if the means are available
  - Remove or restrict access to the means
- Collaboratively identify ways to improve safety
  - Ask: “What will make you feel safe?”
- If the means for the suicide plan are available in your home, secure them. Secure all medications (Rx and OTC) and sharps; reduce access to hoses and ropes in the garage
- All guns in your home should always be secured. If you don't own guns ask: How long would it take to get a gun

# Consider Counseling/Therapy

- Too urgent to wait weeks, but not urgent enough for the ED
  - Call the crisis line 24/7 to discuss options
- Private insurance
  - Call the number on the back of your insurance card or visit your carrier's website
- Apple / Medicaid
  - Call Access to Mental Health 888-693-7200
  - Monday – Friday 8 am to 5 pm
  - Complete the online form at [www.oaaww.org](http://www.oaaww.org) 24/7

# An Idea for the Future

- What if we, as parents and as a community, put the same effort into suicide safety as we do into driver safety
- What if we didn't wait to see risk factors and had preventive talks with our kids about suicide the same way we do about drunk driving
- Imagine a future where we don't feel ashamed of asking for help or getting help for our children

# References

- Maine Suicide Prevention Program: Frequently Asked Questions For Parents @  
<http://www.maine.gov/suicide/parents/faq.htm>
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline  
<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>
- Washington State DOH website  
<http://www.doh.wa.gov/YouandYourFamily/InjuryandViolencePrevention>
- Snohomish Health District website  
<http://www.snohd.org/Portals/o/Snohd/Living/files/AssessmentResultsFINAL8x11.pdf>
- Headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation  
[http://www.headspace.org.au/media/9992/Suicide\\_Contagion.pdf](http://www.headspace.org.au/media/9992/Suicide_Contagion.pdf)



# Additional Resources

- Suicide Prevention Resource Center  
<http://www.sprc.org/basics>
- With Help Comes Hope (a Lifeline project for people living with suicidal thoughts)  
<http://lifelineforattemptsurvivors.org/>
- National Alliance on Mental Illness, Snohomish County  
<http://www.namisnohomishcounty.org/>
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network  
<http://www.nctsn.org/resources>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration  
<http://www.samhsa.gov/suicide-prevention>