

Risk Factors and Warning Signs

Risk factors for suicide include demographics such as age, race, and sexual orientation. In the 15-to-24-year-old age bracket, white males aged 18 to 19 have the highest suicide rates; African American females have the lowest.

The suicide rates for youth ages 10 to 14 have increased dramatically between 1981 and 2004 (51%). While we know sexual orientation places youth at increased risk, the extent is still not clear although research into this risk factor is increasing. [For more information, check out this document from the [Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#) (PDF)]

Additional risk factors include:

- A psychiatric history or drug and/or alcohol abuse. One of the most serious risk factors is a previous suicide attempt, especially when it is combined with other risk factors.
- A family history that includes physical or sexual abuse as well as a family history that includes suicide
- Exposure to another's suicide, even if it is through media reports

In combination with these other factors, the experience of stressful life events can also increase risk.

Certain personality factors can also elevate risk. Students who are impulsive, immature, or anxious worriers tend to have poor judgment and compromised problem-solving skills, which can increase risk. We also need to be concerned about kids who display aggressive behavior, especially outbursts of rage.

Access to means is the most preventive risk factor. A study in Illinois determined that removing access to lethal means, especially guns, was effective in lowering the rate of youth suicides. (Source: University of Illinois at Chicago, Institute for Juvenile Research.) With younger adolescents, it's also recommended to remove access to the over-the-counter acetaminophen, since it is one of the most common medications used in overdoses.

Warning signs

Listen and look for these warning signs for suicidal behavior. Warning signs are the earliest detectable signs that indicate heightened risk for suicide in the near-term (i.e., within minutes, hours, or days), as opposed to risk factors, which suggest longer-term risk (i.e., a year to a lifetime).

NOTE: Aside from direct statements or behaviors threatening suicide, it is often a constellation of signs that raises concern, rather than one or two symptoms alone.

Warning signs can be organized around the word FACTS:

Feelings:

- Hopelessness: feeling like things are bad and won't get any better
- Fear of losing control, going crazy, harming himself/herself or others
- Helplessness: a belief that there's nothing that can be done to make life better
- Worthlessness: feeling like an awful person and people would be better off if he/she were dead
- Hating himself/herself, feeling guilty or ashamed
- Being extremely sad and lonely
- Feeling anxious, worried or angry all the time

Action:

- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Talking or writing about death or destruction
- Aggression: getting into fights or having arguments with people
- Recklessness: doing risky or dangerous things

Changes:

- Personality: behaving like a different person, becoming withdrawn, tired all the time, not caring about anything, or becoming more talkative, outgoing
- Behavior: can't concentrate on school or regular tasks
- Sleeping pattern: sleeping all the time or not being able to sleep at all, or waking up in the middle of the night or early in the morning and not being able to get back to sleep
- Eating habits: losing your appetite and/or overeating and gaining weight
- Losing interest in friends, hobbies, and appearance, or in activities or sports previously enjoyed
- Sudden improvement after a period of being down or withdrawn

Threats:

- Statements like "How long does it take to bleed to death?"
- Threats like "I won't be around much longer" or "Don't tell anyone else...you won't be my friend if you tell!"
- Plans like giving away favorite things, studying about ways to die, obtaining a weapon or a stash of pills: the risk is very high if a person has a plan and the way to do it
- Suicide attempts like overdosing, wrist cutting

Situations:

- Getting into trouble at school, at home, or with the law.
- Recent loss through death, divorce, or separation; the break-up of a relationship; losing an opportunity or a dream; losing self-esteem

- Changes in life that feel overwhelming
- Being exposed to suicide or the death of a peer under any circumstances

Protective Factors

Suicide risk is balanced what is called "protective factors."

Protective factors are just that: personal, behavioral, or situational characteristics that contribute to a student's resiliency and serve as a buffer him or her against factors that can increase risk. One of the most significant protective factors for youth is a caring relationship with a trusted adult. For many youth, that person is a teacher.

Other protections include:

- a sense of connection or participation in school
- positive self-esteem and good coping skills
- access to care for emotional or physical problems or for substance abuse disorders
- cultural or religious beliefs that discourage suicide and promote self-preservation

http://www.violencepreventionworks.org/public/suicide_warning_signs.page