

Helping a Teenager Who May Be at Risk of Suicide



The teenage years can be a difficult time for you and your child. Adolescents may break rules or experiment with different behaviours as they try to establish their independence. As a parent, it's important for you to know the symptoms of emotional distress during this period of change. Mood swings are normal, but young people who are suicidal will often give clues that they feel hopeless or out of control, and it's important to know when your teenager's feelings are a normal part of growing up and when they are putting him or her at risk.

Warning signs

Some changes in behaviour are normal in teenagers. Due to physical and emotional developments, your adolescent may have times when he or she seems moody, irritable, or withdrawn. But when these changes disrupt your child's ability to function on a day-to-day basis, they may be suffering from adolescent depression -- a condition that can lead to suicidal behaviour. Nine in 10 teenagers who commit suicide have been diagnosed at some point with a mental health condition, more than half of them with depression or another mood disorder. But teenagers may be at a high risk for suicide even if they haven't been diagnosed. In fact, some may not have been diagnosed because they haven't had the professional help that could ease their pain.

You should be aware of the following warning signs:

Written or spoken threats of suicide, including social media posts. It is very common for teenagers who attempt or commit suicide to make some kind of threat beforehand. Examples include statements like "Sometimes I wish the pain was all over," "I might as well be dead," or "They will be sorry (or better off) when I'm gone."

Obsession with death. If your child becomes preoccupied with themes of illness, death, and dying, pay attention to them. He may also write poems, essays, or create pieces of artwork that refer to death.

Accidents or high-risk behaviours. These include reckless driving, self-inflicted injuries (e.g., cutting), running away from home, increased alcohol or drug use, food issues, problematic friendships, and criminal behaviour. Watch out for any kind of irrational, abnormal behaviour at home or at school.

Withdrawal and loss of interest. If your child seems depressed for more than two weeks at a time, turns inward, pulls away from peers, quits activities, or has a significant drop in academic performance, you should be concerned.



Recent important losses or situational crises. Your teenager may become suicidal as a result of problems or situational crises in their life. These may include divorce in the family, the break-up of a romantic relationship, being a victim of bullying or harassment, or the death of a loved one. In addition, having a family member, friend, or peer who has committed suicide increases your child's risk of suicide.

Depression that suddenly lifts for unknown reasons. This may indicate that your teenager has decided to commit suicide and has focused their energy on carrying through with any plans. The risk of suicide may be the greatest at this point.

Major changes in sleep or eating patterns. If your child looks worn and tired, can't sleep or sleeps excessively, loses their appetite, or begins overeating, they may be suffering from depression.

Steps to take

Take action right away. Trust your instincts. If it seems like the situation may be serious, seek professional help immediately. Break a confidence if necessary; you could save your child's life.

Talk with your teenager. Don't be afraid to ask your child, "Are you feeling so upset that you are thinking about hurting yourself?" If the response is "Yes," take it very seriously. If he or she seems to have a definite plan, a set time, and the means to commit suicide, then it is a very high risk situation. Asking questions will not put the idea of suicide into someone's head.

Seek immediate help from a professional. Contact a pediatrician, mental health professional, school psychologist, school counsellor, or an emergency room immediately. Call a hotline, such as Crisis Services Canada at 1-833-456-4566.

If you keep guns at home, store them safely or move all firearms elsewhere until the crisis has passed, the American Academy of Pediatrics advises. Keep alcohol and medications under lock and key, too, the AAP says. Most suicides among teenagers and young adults involve guns or overdosing on drugs. Alcohol can impair a teenager's judgment. And the effects of drugs can be all the more dangerous when mixed with alcohol.

Encourage your child not to isolate from family and friends. Help your child see and keep in touch with the important people in their life. "It's usually better to be around other people than to be alone," the American Academy of Pediatrics says, but don't push if your child says no.

How do I talk with my teenager about suicide?

Do not be afraid to talk with your teenager about suicide. Talking openly and sincerely allows your child to communicate their distress to you and can help prevent them from acting on harmful thoughts. Take the time to support and listen to your child -- showing how concerned you are and how much you care can make a real difference.



Here are some ways you can help your child if they are making suicidal threats or behaving in ways that are warning signs of suicide:

Tell your teenager that you care and are worried. You may think your teen knows how much you love them, but reminding them can help them feel that they are not alone. The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that you say, "Depression is an illness of the mind. Not only does it make you sadder than you've ever felt before, it takes control of your thoughts so that you can't see a way out of your sadness. I know that right now it probably seems like it will last forever. But it won't. We love you so much. Please let us get you the right help that will make your sadness go away."

Set up a time to talk. Pick a time when you and your teen can focus on the conversation. Minimize distractions, like the television, phone, email, or household interruptions. Let your teenager know that you want to talk because you're concerned about some of their behaviour. Make it clear that you don't intend to punish them.

Describe what you've noticed. Be specific. You might say, "You've seemed kind of sad over the past few weeks." Be clear about why the behaviour troubles you.

Be willing to listen and provide support. Listen to your teen without interrupting or judging. It's easy for emotions to get in the way, but try to stay as calm as possible while you listen. Try to see things from your teenager's point of view; they'll be more comfortable telling you the truth if you show respect for what they have to say.

Ask concerned questions, and explain that better times are ahead. Do not minimize your child's feelings or perceptions. While it may be difficult to listen to your child's pain, it's important to hear how they feel. Do not try to change your teenager's mood right away by making statements like "Everything is going to be fine" or "That's no big deal, you can't let something like that get you down." Statements like these can cut off the opportunity for your teen to express themselves.

Try to agree with your teen on a plan of action. Use your conversation to begin solving the problem. What help do you need to address the problem? Would your teenager benefit from seeing a mental health counsellor or talking with another trusted adult? Together, come up with a plan to involve others who can help you find solutions. Follow through on your role in the plan of action. Going to the counsellor with your teenager, for example, is critical in showing your child that they can rely on and trust you.

Offer hope. Saying things like, "We're in this together," "I'll see you tomorrow," or "Give me a call later" will let your teenager know that they are not alone and that you want to share the future with them. Making plans to spend time together will keep your teenager focused on the future -- an important step toward recovery.

Encourage your child to exercise. Do all you can to make it possible for your child to engage in types of exercise that they enjoy. "Physical activity as simple as walking or as vigorous as pumping iron can put the brakes on mild to moderate depression," the American Academy of Pediatrics says. Exercise stimulates the release of endorphins, "a substance believed to improve mood and ease pain," the AAP adds. "Two other benefits of exercise: It distracts people from their pain and makes them feel better about themselves."



Where to get help and support

Discuss with your teenager options for advice and support.

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP). EAPs have professional counsellors you can talk with confidentially. They are experienced in adolescent and family issues and can help with troubling behaviours such as alcohol and drug abuse, eating disorders, self-destructive behaviour, and low self-esteem issues.

Support at school. School mental health and crisis team members are responsible for conducting suicide risk assessment, communicating with parents, and providing referrals to community mental health services. They can also provide support at school. Contact your teen's school counsellor or school psychologist if you have concerns.

Family doctor. Your child's pediatrician or the family doctor can address a health problem affecting your teenager. A physician can prescribe medication for depression, if needed, and refer you to other resources in your community.

Friend or relative. A trusted adult can give advice, answer questions about depression and other problems, or offer alternatives to running away. A friend or relative might also encourage your teen to accept professional help.

Seek support for yourself, too. One way to help your teenager is to make sure you have support from others who recognize how difficult this time can be for you. A partner, friend, therapist, or counsellor at your company's EAP may provide the help you need. You might also consider joining a support group for parents.

