Suicide: Risk Factors, Warning Signs, and Prevention/Intervention

According to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, suicide is the 10th leading cause of death for all ages—and the 3rd leading cause of death for those age 10-24, resulting in approximately 4,600 young lives lost each year in the United States alone. A nationwide survey of youth in grades 9-12 in public and private schools in the United States found that:

- 16% reported that they had seriously considered attempting suicide during the past 12 months.
- 13% reported that they made a plan about how they would attempt suicide during the past 12 months.
- 8% reported that they had attempted suicide one or more times during the past 12 months.

Suicide affects all youth, but some groups are at higher risk than others. Boys are more likely than girls to die from suicide. Of the reported suicides in the 10-24 age group, 81% of the deaths were males and 19% were females. Girls, however, are more likely to report attempting suicide than boys. Cultural variations in suicide rates also exist. The top three methods used in suicides of young people include firearm (45%), suffocation (40%), and poisoning (8%).

Risk factors are often confused with warning signs of suicide. Risk factors indicate someone is a heightened risk for suicide. They are the characteristics that make it more likely that an individual will consider, attempt, or die by suicide. Warning signs, however, indicate an immediate risk of suicide. The more of these signs a person shows, the greater the urgency for intervention.
**Risk Factors for Suicide**

- Mental and emotional disorders, particularly depression and other serious mood disorders
- Alcohol and other drug/substance abuse disorders
- Feelings of hopelessness and despair
- Impulsive and aggressive tendencies/behavior
- History of trauma and abuse
- Major physical/medical illness
- Family history of suicide
- Previous suicide attempt
- Job or financial losses
- Loss of a significant relationship
- Lack of support group (peers, friends, family) and abnormal feelings of isolation
- Lack of healthcare (especially mental healthcare)
- Not knowing that there is mental healthcare/counseling readily available

**Warning Signs of Suicide**

- Talking about wanting to die
- Planning a way to kill oneself
- Talking about feeling hopeless/having no purpose/reason to live
- Talking about feeling trapped
- Talking about being in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others/feelings of self-blame and shame
- Marked increase in the use of alcohol and/or drugs
- Acting anxious, agitated, irritable, or reckless (risk-taking behavior)
- Insomnia or significant loss of sleep for an extended period
- Withdrawing from friends, family, activities/isolating oneself
- Showing rage and hostile outbursts/talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings, especially depression and despair

**What This Means and What To Do**

Risk factors are characteristics that make it more likely that individuals will consider, attempt, or die by suicide. Protective factors however, are characteristics that make it less likely that individuals will consider, attempt, or die by suicide.

Risk and protective factors play a critical role in suicide prevention. Identifying risk and protective factors provides critical information to assess and manage suicide risk in individuals and yields areas of emphasis for interventions that help prevent suicide. Simply stated, decreasing risk factors and increasing protective factors should decrease suicide risk significantly. This is why awareness and intervention is absolutely necessary for prevention.
The bad news is that suicide can’t be treated. The ensuing grief and collateral damage to family and friends is incomprehensible and irreversible. Suicide is truly a permanent solution for what could have been a short-term problem.

Teenagers are especially vulnerable, as the emotions they experience are highly charged and magnified. Adults generally have more foresight, along with improved cognitive skills, that allow them to put problems into perspective. Teenagers have limited foresight that often results in reactionary and rapid mood decline and depression, leading to the fatal conclusion that life will never get any better. They often can’t see past their emotional pain. This type of hopelessness and despair is a very large red flag, indeed, as it can be so terribly strong that it dominates the willingness to end ones’ life.

The good news is that suicide awareness and prevention saves lives. Reaching out with intervention is necessary, not a choice. Mandate vs. option is the correct and loving mindset.

Parents understand how important it is for us to trust our teenagers. We look for appropriate and responsible behavior. We want them to develop kind values, use good judgment, and stay actively involved with family and positive peer relationships. We want them to make good decisions, exercise good choices, and develop a mature sense of accountability for their actions.

However, there is a problem parents often overlook—a crucial yet fundamental necessity in raising teenagers: Our children need to trust us as parents. Teenagers frequently believe that their parents will not be able to handle their problems and strong feelings, so they don’t express them or open up about their problems and difficulties. There is a strong reluctance that they will be misunderstood, minimized, or even feel like a burden to their families. So parents, adults, and friends: Listen and respond, but never judge or shame. Keep the rapport positive and solution-oriented. A mind-set alone can save lives. Reach out to professional resources—including family doctors, clergy, educators, mental health professionals, and suicide awareness foundations. These are protective factors that decrease suicide risk.

We are A.R.C. Angels Foundation. This is our mission statement, this is who we are:

“A.R.C. Angels Foundation (AAF) is dedicated to saving lives by getting teens actively involved in the prevention of teenage suicide. AAF provides educational programs that empower teens to recognize the signs and symptoms of suicide and take the necessary actions to stop the loss of life.”

Finally, if you are sad—talk to someone. Pain shared is pain lessened.

If you are experiencing a crisis, call 911 or 1-800-273-8255 (the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline)
www.arcsangelsfoundation.org