

Detecting Youth at Risk for Suicide

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As parents, friends, or concerned adults, it is important to recognize youth at risk for suicide, and to be able to make a quick, appropriate response to youth in crisis.

All of us need to stay alert because suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15-24 year olds, according to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

Rural youth are at more risk for suicide than their urban counterparts. By race and ethnicity, American Indian youth are most at risk. For every suicide, there are 25 attempted suicides, according to Emma N. Viera, M.P.H., in a recent report on adolescent suicide in Arizona.

Arizona's Adolescent Health Coalition, lists the following warning signs: withdrawal from family and friends, excessive drug and/or alcohol use, eating or sleeping problems, and risk taking behaviors. Persons in imminent danger may talk of suicide, give away possessions, have a suicide plan or appear suddenly happy after a long depression.

Certain situations may indicate a time for extra watchfulness. For example, parental divorce, a breakup, school problems, physical or sexual abuse, or fighting with parents may overwhelm a child's ability to cope. Studies also indicate that gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth are 3 times more likely to attempt suicide. If there was a successful attempt by a family member, the person will be at a higher risk, also.

The bottom line is someone with a plan and/or the means of carrying it out, is most at jeopardy and needs immediate help. Do not leave the person alone. Do not let them leave your presence. For example, Arizona vital statistics indicated that in 1998, 78% of adolescent suicides were carried out by use of guns and 16% were by hanging or suffocation.

If a youth manifests the warning signs, or talks of suicide, take him or her seriously. Listen and ask questions. Determine the risk level by asking, "Are you thinking of killing yourself?" Follow up by asking if they have a plan. Show you care by letting them know you will help them get help.

A suicidal statement should never be ignored. It should not be seen as attention seeking, but as a genuine cry for help. Nor should a refusal to answer questions about feeling suicidal. Talking about suicide will not cause it, but it may prevent it.

Help make the environment safe by removing guns and medications because guns are most often used in successful suicides and medications or poisons are overwhelmingly used in attempts that fail.

Seek professional help. Horizon Human Services offers a 24-hour crisis intervention line 1 (800) 890-2880 or 836-2880.

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