



Warning Signs for Suicide

29 August 2012

This is quite a somber article because it reflects the happenings of the last two weeks. And the last two weeks happen to involve lots of people in great pain as well as the stories of several successful suicide attempts.

Last week, while at a workshop, the gentleman next to me told the group about an ex-colleague, who on hearing he had been laid off from work, proceeded to go home and shoot himself in the head. This morning a very close friend let me know that a family member had lost her partner to suicide - also a shooting. Last week I also had the unusual situation of having to refer three of my clients in one week to a psychiatrist. All a testimony to the statement that, "Life is hard", and we will go through challenging times. Now, while in the midst of turmoil it can seem like there is no way out, there is much that can be done to see through and ride out the negative times. Life goes on and with an awareness of what is happening and how to deal with it, people do feel better and go on to live better and happier lives. With some knowledge and attention to those around us, we may be able to prevent some of these tragedies.

In this post there are three sections. Section one is about the risk factors for suicide. Section two looks at warning signs, and section three is about what to do if suicide seems imminent.

What are some of the risk factors which are associated with an increased risk of suicide?



Risk Factors

- The person has already made one or more suicide attempts.
- There is a family history of suicide attempts.
- A friend or co-worker has committed suicide.
- An experience of a traumatic life event such as a job loss or a relationship breakup
- The person or the family has a history of mental illness or substance abuse.
- There is violence or impulsiveness within the family or the family/person has a tendency to solve problems with violence
- History of emotional, physical or sexual abuse.
- Incarceration
- Chronic or terminal illness including chronic pain
- A person who is alone, unskilled or unemployed
- People in certain professions such as police officers and health care workers who deal with traumatic situations frequently as part of their job.

Warning signs are signs that indicate the person may be thinking about suicide or already be planning the act.

- Talking, or writing about death or suicide; suicide threats – all threats should be taken seriously
- Excessive sadness or moodiness

- Excessive or unexpected anger or rage
- Making comments about being hopeless, helpless, or worthless. Saying things like: “It would be better if I wasn’t here.” “I want out.” “I wish I were dead.” “I’m going to end it all.” “You will be better off without me.” “What’s the point of living?” “Soon you won’t have to worry about me.” “Who cares if I am dead anyway?”
- Engaging in dangerous or harmful behavior or threatening to engage in such behavior – such as reckless driving, running red lights, practicing unsafe sex, reckless use of drugs and alcohol – something that indicates the person may not value their life.
- Loss of interest in activities one used to care about; withdrawal from friends and social groups
- Putting affairs in order, tying up loose ends, changing or making a will, giving away personal possessions; cleaning up his or her room or home; visiting or calling people to say goodbye.
- Buying a gun, hose, rope, pills or other medications; stocking up on pills
- Changes in motion or appearance. For instance moving with extreme speed or slowness. Lack of concern about appearance and hygiene.
- A sudden and unexpected switch from being very sad to appearing to be calm and happy (because they have made the decision to end their life).
- A recent trauma or life crisis – which could include the sudden death of a loved one or pet, divorce or the break-up of a relationship, diagnosis of a major illness, the loss of a job, serious financial problems, failing exams, failing to get into a job or coveted educational course/institution



What to do

If someone is talking about suicide take the person seriously. Listen to what he or she is saying. Unless you are a trained professional, rather just listen and encourage the person to seek professional help. Avoid making statements such as, “You have so much to live for.” Don’t try to impose your thinking on them. Actually you don’t know what they are going through; so don’t say that you do. You probably will not be able to argue the person out of suicide. Just showing caring and understanding, and listening to the person can do more than arguments and reasoning. Keep the person as calm as possible. Try and not do or say things to get them more agitated or depressed.



Any talk of suicide is an emergency. Have that person talk with a mental health professional immediately – and that means immediately, not in an hour’s time or tomorrow.

Go with the person to seek professional help. Do not leave them on their own. Get support from other family members or friends if you can. Remove any drugs and weapons or other sharp objects they may have on them or that are nearby within their reach. Accompany them to the emergency room of a hospital, their doctor, or phone 911 or a helpline for them. Be supportive while they are being treated. Encourage them to follow any prescribed treatment regimen.

And then one final reminder to you! Once it is all over, just make sure that you, yourself, are doing well. Trauma can spill over to the person doing the helping. Take some time to make sure you have dealt with the event and are doing well.