

SUICIDE PREVENTION: PROTECTIVE AND RISK FACTORS

We know that suicide is a heavy topic, but we don't prevent suicide by not talking about it. And, more importantly, the more we understand about suicide, what keeps people from moving from ideation to action, and what puts people at higher risk, the better equipped we are to support those struggling.

Here are a few of the important understandings from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's* extensive research on this complex issue:

- **No one takes their life for a single reason.** Life stresses, combined with known risk factors, such as childhood trauma, substance use, or even chronic physical pain, can contribute to someone taking their life.
- **Suicide is related to brain functions** that affect decision-making and behavioral control, making it difficult for people to find positive solutions.
- 90 percent of people who die by suicide have an underlying—and potentially **treatable—mental health condition.**
- Depression, bipolar disorder, and substance use are strongly linked to suicidal thinking and behavior.

In our shared goal of preventing suicide, it's important to acknowledge the things that help people stay—we'll refer to those as **protective factors**. On the other side of the coin, there are factors that increase a person's risk of dying by suicide. Still, please know that the presence of risk factors does not guarantee that an individual will attempt suicide, and the absence of protective factors does not mean that someone is destined to experience suicidal thoughts or behaviors.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS:

- **Strong Support System:** Having close relationships with family, friends, or community members who provide emotional support and encouragement can be a significant protective factor against suicide.
- **Access to Mental Health Care:** Access to mental health services, including therapy, counseling, and psychiatric care, can provide individuals with the tools and support needed to cope with stressors and mental health challenges.
- **Effective Coping Skills:** Developing healthy coping mechanisms such as problem-solving skills, emotional regulation techniques, and stress management strategies can help individuals navigate difficult situations and reduce the risk of suicide.
- **A Sense of Purpose:** Having a sense of purpose, meaning, or belonging in life can serve as a protective factor against suicidal thoughts and behaviors. This could include engaging in meaningful activities, pursuing personal goals, or participating in community events or efforts.
- **Positive Self-Esteem:** Maintaining a positive self-image and self-worth can buffer individuals from the negative effects of stress, trauma, and adversity, reducing the likelihood of suicidal ideation.
- **Access to Crisis Intervention Resources:** Knowing how to access crisis hotlines, support groups, and other emergency services can provide individuals with immediate help and support during times of crisis.
- **Restricting Access to Lethal Means:** Limiting access to lethal means of suicide, such as firearms, medications, or other potentially harmful substances, can reduce the likelihood of impulsive suicide attempts.

*American Foundation For Suicide Prevention: <https://afsp.org/what-we-ve-learned-through-research>

RISK FACTORS:

- **Mental Health Disorders:** Conditions such as depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, substance use disorders, and certain personality disorders are associated with an increased risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviors.
- **Previous Suicide Attempts:** Individuals who have made previous suicide attempts are at a higher risk of future attempts or completed suicide.
- **Substance Misuse:** Substance misuse, including alcohol and drug misuse, can impair judgment, increase impulsivity, and exacerbate underlying mental health issues, contributing to an elevated risk of suicide.
- **Chronic Illness or Pain:** Individuals experiencing chronic physical illnesses, disabilities, or chronic pain conditions may be at greater risk of suicidal ideation due to the impact on quality of life, functional impairment, and psychological distress.
- **Trauma and Adversity:** Exposure to trauma, abuse, neglect, or other adverse life experiences, especially during childhood, can increase the risk of mental health problems and suicidal behaviors later in life.
- **Social Isolation:** Feelings of loneliness, social isolation, or perceived burdensomeness can contribute to feelings of hopelessness and despair, increasing the risk of suicide.
- **Family History of Suicide:** A family history of suicide or exposure to suicide within one's social network can be a risk factor, potentially influencing an individual's perception of suicide as a viable solution to problems.

★ Look for the signs.

It's safe to say that unless you're a trained mental health professional, you are not in a position to assess someone who may be suicidal. But what we all can do is notice, act compassionately, ask hard questions, and connect people to resources. Here are a few warning signs that a person may be thinking about suicide.

TALKING ABOUT:

Feeling hopeless | Wanting to die or to kill oneself | Being in unbearable pain
| Having no purpose | Being a burden to others

BEHAVIORS LIKE:

Researching ways to die | Increased use of substances anxious, agitated,
or reckless | Sleeping too much or too little | Extreme mood swings
| Withdrawing from loved ones

★ Ask the questions.

If you're concerned about someone, or they are showing some of the warning signs, please know it's OK to ask the question: "Are you thinking about suicide?" or "Are you thinking of killing yourself?"

Asking this can feel uncomfortable and even a little scary, but being direct with the person you're concerned about and listening to them is essential. You will not cause someone to start thinking about suicide simply by asking. By starting the conversation you'll be making space for honesty, compassion, and the possibility of help to exist.

If someone shares that they are considering suicide or have a plan, it's important to reach out for help immediately—whether that involves going to the nearest mental health center or emergency room (if the situation requires this immediacy), or picking up the phone and calling the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988**.