

How Parents Can Spot the Warning Signs and Provide Help to a Suicidal Teenager



As a parent/caregiver, it can be very hard to hear your teen talking about suicide or wanting to hurt themselves. If you know what the signs of suicide might look like, and what actions you can take, you may feel better prepared to help your teen when they are experiencing a crisis.



A suicidal teen may...

- ✓ Say that they feel depressed, or have been diagnosed with depression
- ✓ Have a sudden change in mood (their mood may suddenly improve after feeling depressed)
- ✓ Increase their use of alcohol or drugs
- ✓ Feel hopeless, helpless and unhappy
- ✓ Give away important possessions
- ✓ Withdraw from family and friends
- ✓ Talk directly about death or indirectly about 'not being around anymore'
- ✓ Talk about ways to die by suicide or a specific plan for a suicide attempt
- ✓ Have attempted suicide in the past



You can help a suicidal teen by...

1. Taking suicide talk and warning signs seriously

- Any signs of depression, comments about death or threats of suicide should be taken seriously.
- Suicidal words or actions should not be dismissed as a way for your child to get attention.
- Be cautious about telling teens ‘how good they have it’, instead tell your teen that you are concerned about them and that you want to listen to them.

2. Ask directly about feelings and suicide

- Asking about feelings will show that you are committed to helping. Ask your teen gentle but direct questions:
 - “It looks to me like you are feeling unhappy...are you?”
 - “Do you sometimes feel like life isn’t worth living?”
 - “What have you thought about doing to end your life?”
- Asking about suicide will help you to gain some information about their state of mind and how urgent the suicidal crisis is. **Asking directly about suicide will not put ideas into your teen’s head.**
- If you do not ask questions you may miss the chance to help your teen, or the chance to show them that you care about their feelings and what happens to them.

3. Helping your child find hope

- Communicate hope to your teen by emphasizing that while they are alive, there is still a chance to resolve their problems, and that together you can work at making things better.
- Offer something for your teen to hang on to; planning a session with a mental health professional can give your teen hope and something to live for.

4. Finding skilled help

- Professional help is needed when your teenager is suicidal.
- Contact a Youth Crisis Service, or call the Manitoba Suicide Line (1-877-435-7170) for immediate help during a suicidal crisis.
- The immediate crisis can be dealt with earlier and more effectively if you take your child to see a mental-health professional first rather than taking them to your family doctor.

5. Making changes in your own life

- Making changes in your life to accommodate your teenager's needs, such as increasing the amount of time that you spend with your teen, is necessary to help them recover from mental health problems.
- Change is difficult for everyone, but if you compromise or make a change that might help your child, then this could prevent the crisis from going any further.

6. Learning how to cope with your personal feelings

- As a caregiver, it is likely that you will be experiencing a lot of pain and worry if your teenager is suicidal.
- Getting help from a professional to deal with your own feelings will allow you to better support your teen.
- You are not a bad parent because your teen is having an emotional crisis. Being aware and willing to accept that there is a problem shows that you are a parent that cares.

7. Letting your teen know that you love them unconditionally

- Tell your teen that you care about them and that they are not alone. Try to do this during calm periods. Expressions of love are often lost during angry arguments; especially when your teen is experiencing a crisis. Tell them verbally or indirectly (i.e. through text messaging).
- Caring relationships are an important factor that can protect a young person from suicidal thoughts. Feeling cared for and understood by someone, particularly a parent or caregiver, can help to change your teen's mind about suicide, or may even save your teen's life.

Adapted from **Understanding Your Teenager's Depression: Issues, Insights and Practical Guidance for Parents** (2005)