



## What Every Parent Should Know About Youth Suicide

“I am going to kill myself.”

As a parent, that is probably the most unsettling thing you can hear from your child. While suicide is still a somewhat rare occurrence, tragically, it does happen. In Wisconsin, for example, suicide is the second leading cause of death for young people between the ages of 15 and 24. As a parent, what can you do?

National studies show that over 60 percent of high school students contemplate suicide, but only 8 to 13 percent actually engage in suicidal behavior. In Wisconsin, 15 percent of high school students report having seriously considered suicide. These numbers are alarming, and it is important for all parents to watch for changes in a child's mood and behavior. Typically, most young people experience stress in coping with schoolwork, peers and the inevitable social conflicts that emerge, identity, sexuality, and growing independence. Almost all youth will have emotional ups and downs as they learn how to better cope with life's challenges. Youth contemplating suicide usually exhibit warning signs by way of behaviors and statements that indicate a high level of risk. Parents need to know the warning signs and risk factors so they know how to help their child and when to seek professional help.

Most youth who die by suicide have a mental illness such as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia (hallucinations or delusions), and/or a substance use disorder. HOWEVER, it is important to remember that most youth with mental disorders DO NOT attempt suicide. Youth who have had previous suicidal thoughts or attempts, those who experience repeated physical or emotional trauma, or those suffering from abuse or neglect, are at a higher risk for suicide. A critical factor to consider is if your child has recently experienced the loss of a relationship, or a perceived or real loss in status, humiliation, bullying, shame, or despair. The loss of a friend, a poor grade in school, or getting into trouble with the law, can feel like earth-shattering events to a young person. Be concerned if your child starts to exhibit **warning** signs such as feelings of hopelessness, rage and uncontrolled anger, physical health complaints, engagement in risky behaviors, feeling trapped or overwhelmed, an increased use of alcohol or drugs, withdrawal, giving precious things away, anxiety, agitation, sleeplessness or excess sleeping, changes in appetite, or dramatic mood changes. If any of these signs are exhibited, pay special attention, and explore with your child, without blame or judgment, his or her feelings, actions, and thoughts. Expressing concern about your child's behavior may be a good place to start. Encourage your child to talk to you. Communicate that you are worried and want to listen, and together, you will figure out what to do. Asking youth if they have thought about suicide does not increase their risk. In fact, your child may feel relief in knowing it is ok to talk about these sad feelings, and most importantly, that you care and want to understand. Reassure your child that you are there and will be there for him/her.

Warning signs of acute risk are when a child threatens suicide or looks for ways to kill himself/herself by seeking access to lethal means, such as firearms, pills, or alcohol. Other signs to watch for are talking or writing about death, either directly, (“I wish I were dead.” or, “I’m going to end it all.”) or indirectly (“You will be better off without me.”, or, “Who cares if I’m dead, anyways?”).

If, at anytime, you think your child is in imminent danger, you must seek professional help. If you have reason to believe that there is immediate potential for self-harm, then you should call your local county mental health crisis intervention number (1-888-552-6642) or 911. Stay with your child and keep him/her safe until a mental health professional can complete a full risk assessment and develop a safety plan. Remember, there is no “cookie cutter recipe” for assessing suicide risk. You may want to seek guidance and advice from family and friends, but trust your instincts! If you believe the situation is serious, seek help!

A youth in crisis can act impulsively, but if lethal means (guns, drugs, alcohol) aren’t readily available, the crisis may resolve without any self-harm. As a matter of family safety, parents should limit the amount of alcohol in the home, keep firearms locked up, and store medications out of sight. Surrounding your child with a supportive family, caring adults, safe schools, and helpful friends can buffer against risk factors. As a parent, you play a key role in assuring your child’s well-being by listening, having fun with your child, and showing that you care. In fact, giving your child the feeling of being understood and connected to his/her parents and family may be the best gift that you can give to your child.

Recommended Resources that were used and adapted to write this article:

Suicide Prevention Resource Center ([www.sprg.org](http://www.sprg.org))  
Mental Health America ([www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org))  
American Association of Suicidology ([www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org))  
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention ([www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org))  
National Association of School Psychologists  
Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction ([www.dpi.wi.gov](http://www.dpi.wi.gov))  
[www.preventsuicidewi.org](http://www.preventsuicidewi.org)  
[www.hopes-wi.org](http://www.hopes-wi.org)

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