

## Introduction

Suicide is the act of ending your own life. It is a major public health concern. Each year, approximately one million people die by suicide worldwide.

Suicide is tragic. But it is often preventable. Knowing the risk factors for suicide and who is at risk can help reduce the suicide rate.

This reference summary is about suicide. It includes information about who is at risk, how suicide can be prevented and what to do if you or someone you know is considering suicide.



## Suicide

Suicide is the act of ending your own life. It is a reaction to stressful life situations. Most people are uncomfortable with the topic of suicide. Too often, victims are blamed and their families and friends are disgraced. As a result, people do not talk openly about suicide. For Americans, suicide is the 10th leading cause of death.

People may consider suicide when they are hopeless. They may not be able to see any other solution to their problems. Often suicide is related to:

- A major stressful event.
- Alcohol or substance abuse.
- Serious depression.
- Some common life situations that can cause suicidal thoughts are:
  - Financial crisis, in which the person does not have a job or has a lot of debt.
  - Health problems, in which an illness has greatly reduced quality of life.
  - Loss of a loved one, which could be caused by a difficult separation or death.



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When a person does not have hope for the future, they may wrongly assume that suicide is a solution. The person may not be able to imagine a time in the future when the crisis will be over. Suicide may seem like the only way out. It is possible that suicide is partly related to genetics. People with a family history of suicide are more likely to attempt suicide or have suicidal thoughts.

Some researchers think this may be linked to genes for impulsive behavior.

If someone talks about suicide, you should take it seriously. Urge the person to get help from his or her doctor or go to an emergency room. Some areas also have suicide prevention hotlines. People can call these hotlines to get immediate counseling when they have suicidal thoughts.

If you are having suicidal thoughts, get help from a professional. Therapy and medicines can help most people overcome suicidal thoughts and improve their lives.



## Prevention through Warning Signs

Suicide is a significant public health problem. There is a lot to learn about how to prevent it. One strategy is to learn about the warning signs of suicide. This section reviews some of the most common warning signs.

People thinking about suicide often talk about suicide before ending their lives.

A person might say, "I'm going to kill myself" or "I'd be better off dead."

Expressions like these should be taken seriously, even if the person does not seem to be sincere. A person thinking about suicide may be focused on death, dying or violence. The person may always choose books or movies with these themes. He or she may also repeatedly talk about news stories on such tragedies.

People who intend to commit suicide often take time to plan how they will do it. For example, a suicidal person may purchase a gun. They may hoard pills that can cause a fatal overdose.

A person may also withdraw from social contact if he or she is thinking about suicide. They may repeatedly tell you that they want to be left alone.



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When a person is thinking about taking his or her own life, she or he may develop personality changes or become anxious or agitated. It is also common for people to have mood swings. He or she may be very positive one day and deeply discouraged the next. People thinking about suicide often talk about feeling trapped or hopeless about a situation. They may start using or increase their use of alcohol or drugs to try to deal with these emotions.

A change in normal routine is also common for people thinking about suicide. This includes changes in eating and sleeping patterns, work attendance and social activities. They may develop risky or self-destructive behaviors, like using drugs or driving recklessly.

It is also common for people considering suicide to give away their belongings. Without a clear reason, they begin getting their affairs in order. They may pay off old debts or draft a last will and testament. They may say goodbye as if they do not plan on seeing you again. When these warning signs appear, quickly connect the person to supportive services. It can help save a life.

## **Risk Factors**

Suicide does not discriminate. People of all genders, ages and ethnicities are at risk for suicide. But people most at risk tend to share certain characteristics.

The main risk factors for suicide are:

- A prior suicide attempt.
- Depression, other mental disorders or substance abuse.
- Family history of a mental disorder or substance abuse.
- Family history of suicide.
- Family violence, including physical or sexual abuse.

Other risk factors for suicide include:

- Being exposed to others' suicidal behavior, such as that of family members, peers or media figures.
- Being in prison or jail.
- Having guns or other firearms in the home.



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Men are more likely to die by suicide than women, but women are more likely to attempt suicide. Men are more likely to use deadlier methods, such as firearms or suffocation. Women are more likely than men to attempt suicide by poisoning. Children and young people are also at risk for suicide. Year after year, suicide remains one of the top three leading causes of death for young people ages 15 to 24. Older adults are at risk for suicide, too. In fact, white males age 85 and older consistently have the highest suicide rate than any other age and ethnic group.

Among ethnicities in the USA, Native Americans and Alaska Natives tend to have the highest rate of suicides, followed by non-Hispanic Whites. Hispanics tend to have the lowest rate of suicides, while African Americans tend to have the second lowest rate.

Many people have some of these risk factors but do not attempt suicide. Suicide is not a normal response to stress. It is, however, a sign of extreme distress and not a harmless bid for attention.

## Getting Help

If a person has made a suicide attempt and is injured or is at immediate risk of self-harm, call 911 or the local emergency number immediately. People who are not injured but are experiencing ongoing thoughts about suicide can call a suicide hotline number. In the United States, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available at 1-800-273-8255. The phone call is free.

It is very difficult for a person to manage suicidal thoughts or behaviors on their own. The help of a professional is needed to overcome problems linked to suicidal thinking. People who have suicidal thoughts but aren't in a crisis situation should talk to a health care provider about treatment options. Treatment may include:

- Psychotherapy.
- Treatment for addictions.
- Medicines.
- Family support and education.



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Psychotherapy can help people explore the issues that make them feel suicidal. A treatment plan is developed with specific goals in mind. Therapy sessions should not be skipped, even when a person doesn't feel like he or she needs to go. People who are informed about what causes suicidal thoughts and behaviors are less likely to attempt suicide. Learning about an underlying cause, such as depression, can help a person overcome thoughts of self-harm. Therapy and other treatments can also be used to help a person overcome addiction. Addictions to drugs or alcohol may lead to suicidal thoughts.

Medicines are often used to treat patients with suicidal thoughts.

Medicines include:

- Anti-anxiety medicines.
- Antidepressants.
- Antipsychotic medicines.
- Other medicines used for mental illness.



If medicines are prescribed, they should be taken exactly as directed. Even when a person feels well, they should not skip a dose.

Family support and education can also help. People who seek treatment for suicidal thoughts can learn what triggers them. Patients and their friends and family members can then pay attention to warning signs and act appropriately. There are also a number of organizations available to help people cope with suicidal thinking. Joining one or several of these groups can help people identify personal problems that cause suicidal thinking and provide healthier alternatives for solving those problems. Groups are also available for family support and education.

To help keep yourself or a loved one from feeling suicidal:

- Get treatment.
- Follow the treatment plan.
- Know the warning signs.
- Remove any potential means of committing suicide.
- Establish a support network of caring people.
- Remember that suicidal feelings are temporary.



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## Summary

Suicide is the act of ending your own life. People may consider suicide when they are hopeless and can't see any other solution to their problems. Often it's related to serious depression, alcohol or substance abuse or a major stressful event.

Suicide does not discriminate. People of all genders, ages and ethnicities are at risk for suicide. There are many reasons a person might consider suicide. Most often, suicidal thoughts develop when a person feels like they can't cope with what seems like an overwhelming life situation.

Getting help for suicidal thoughts and behaviors depends on the specific situation, including a patient's level of suicide risk and the underlying problems causing the suicidal thoughts or behavior. Therapy, medicine, treatment for addiction and family support are often helpful in preventing suicide.



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