

FACT SHEET

Teen Suicide, warning signs and how to get help

On the 10th of October it was World Mental Health Day. As Scouts we need to be prepared to help others, so we have prepared the following information to help Scouts support our members and other people in society.

It's normal for teens to feel sad, angry or moody. Setbacks such as getting cut from a sports team, doing poorly on a test, being grounded by a parent or having problems with a friend or classmate can bring on lots of emotions which can be difficult to handle on their own.

It's also normal to feel overwhelmed and desperate sometimes and just want to escape from a situation that seems impossible to deal with or to get out of. Other times we can get really angry or be very ashamed and just want to hide. But when the depressed mood stays for weeks or even months and affects a teen's ability to function normally, it might be depression.

It is important that as friends, siblings, parents and care givers we keep our eyes open for possible warning signs – red flags - and once spotted, talk to an adult or professional we trust in order to make sure the teen gets the help they need.

What are the causes for suicide?

As mentioned there is not one single reason, usually it's a combination of many things. The most frequent ones are:

Significant life events/changes

Often when big events, changes occur in the life of a teen they can get depressed. For example the death of a loved one, parents' divorce, moving to a new city or school, being rejected from the high school your family attended, being attacked and/or abused, etc.. Whether or not stressful events lead to depression can depend on how well a teen is able to cope, stay positive, and get support.

Depression

Depression is considered the leading cause of suicide. A teenager that is depressed will feel hopeless and see no reason to live. As teens go through puberty, levels of brain chemicals (called neurotransmitters), hormones, and genetics can also play a role.

Kids and teens who are depressed are more likely to use alcohol and drugs as coping methods than those who aren't depressed. Teens who are depressed are at higher risk for suicide.

Substance abuse

By substance abuse we are mainly referring to alcohol and drug usage. This is often related to suicide. Both alcohol and drugs can weaken a teen's self-control and judgement and therefore can bring on suicidal thoughts, even amongst people whom are not depressed.

Other (none) diagnosed mental illnesses / chronic illnesses

Sometimes mental and personality disorders such as schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, anorexia, etc... or chronic illnesses can cause a teen to take their own life.

Suicide is preventable

For all the potential reasons mentioned above help is available. This means that in most cases, suicide can be prevented if the teenager gets the help he or she needs. Suicide is not always planned. Often it happens at an impulse. The best way to help prevent suicide is to know the warning signs, the so-called red flags.

Red Flags/Warning Signs

It is important to note that teenagers are generally moody and change their behaviours regularly. However with most of the suicide attempts there are signs that someone may be thinking about, or planning, a suicide attempt. So if you spot more than one of these red flags over a longer period you have cause for concern. **It is imperative to TAKE THE SIGNS SERIOUSLY!**

- Talking about suicide or death in general. S/he might say things like "nothing matters" or "I wish I was dead".
- Talking about "going away". This combined with a sudden lift in spirits might indicate that the teen is relieved in knowing their problems will soon end.
- Referring to things they "won't be needing," and giving away possessions.
- Talking about feeling hopeless, depressed or feeling guilty.
- Withdrawing from friends or family and losing the desire to go out.
- Having no desire to take part in favourite things or activities.
- Having trouble concentrating or thinking clearly.
- Experiencing changes in eating or sleeping habits.
- Engaging in self-destructive behaviours e.g. drinking alcohol, taking drugs, self-harming ...

Remember

Sometimes, teens who die as a result of suicide seem to give no clue beforehand. This can leave friends and family members not only grief stricken, but also with a feeling of guilt and questions about how they missed the signs. It is important to know that these signs are there in most cases, but not always. Sometimes there is no warning and you should not blame yourselves.

What if this is you?

If you have been thinking about suicide, get help now! Depression is a powerful illness and your feelings are real, they are not a sign of weakness. Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem, so here are ways to deal with the problem and to avoid taking your own life:

Talk to someone you trust right away!

If you can't talk to a parent, talk to a relative, a school counsellor, a religious leader, a teacher or coach or even ask your Scouter for help.

Pick up the phone and call or go online for help. (Contacts and links added below)

There are trained professionals who can help you without ever knowing your name or seeing your face. All calls are confidential so no one you know will find out that you've called. The people on the other end are there to help you figure out how to work through your situation.

Make a plan to make sure you're not by yourself.

Remember you are not thinking clearly right now. It is best not to be on your own. Make a plan to be around friends and family so you can protect yourself from hurting yourself. Remember that your illness will make you focus on the bad things. This is temporary and with help can get better.

If you feel down, try and get involved in things you like to do. If at that time you prefer to do something at home e.g. watch TV, then just ensure there is someone else in the room with you.

Don't use alcohol and/or drugs.

Ask your parents to lock up any alcohol, medication, weapons or other dangerous items in the house. Don't go to places where people are drinking, doing drugs or where you would have access to medication or weapons. Don't spend time with people who could put you in these situations. Ask your friends or family members to take your car keys from you when you are feeling very depressed.

Remind yourself of the good things.

Keep pictures of your loved ones in a prominent place or with you at all times to remind yourself that you are cherished and loved.

How can you help a troubled friend or family member?

Talk and give emotional support

It is always a good thing to start a conversation with someone you think may be considering suicide. A teen who is suicidal needs to know you care and are there to listen to them. Most of the time people who are considering suicide are willing to discuss their feelings with people who care and show concern

Encourage them to get help

Encourage the teenager to talk to an adult s/he trusts. Depression inhibits seeing the bigger picture so it can help to have an adult/professional talk things through with them as this may give the teen an opportunity to consider other solutions to problems.

Get adult help / speak out

Even if a friend swears you to secrecy, you must get help from an adult you trust as soon as possible. Your friend's life could depend on it and s/he might be deeply depressed and you might not know how to recognize that he or she needs help.

If you don't want to breach their trust, call a crisis line. These are confidential resources and the person at any of these places is happy to talk to you to help you figure out what to do.

Learn all you can about depression and suicide prevention.

You might be your friend's / the teens' only source of information.

Invite them out.

They might not want to go at first. If they say no, ask them again later. Alternatively, offer to stay at home with them and do something nice together. Make sure they do not have access to things that can cause injury, like knives, guns, car keys, alcohol or drugs.

Do not take responsibility to get your friend better again.

You are not a mental health professional. Get adult help. Always remember that if a teenager does take their own life, that it is not your fault! Don't be afraid to talk to an adult about your own feelings of anger and guilt.

A note to parents

Having a child go through a depression can be very painful. Often your teen will refuse your help and insist you would not understand. You will be told by other parents that your child will eventually "snap out of it" or "needs more discipline." However mental illness is very real and it is therefore better to seek advice from a medical professional. Whichever treatment your teen, yourself and the doctor decide on, the most important thing is that your child is being helped by people who are trained for this. It's also helpful to get support for yourself from other parents who can share their experiences and offer support.

Where to get help?

The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suicide Crisis Line: 0800 567 567 • SMS 31393 • Landline (011) 783-1474
ChildLine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Crisis Line 0800 055 555 • Bloemfontein (051) 430 3311 • Cape Town (021) 762 8198 • Durban (031) 312 0904 • Johannesburg (011) 484 1970 • Port Elizabeth (041) 453 0441.
Lifeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Durban (031) 312 2323 • Ekurhuleni (011) 422 4242 • Free State 072 068 8159 • Garden Route (044) 343 2769 • Johannesburg (011) 728 1347 • Klerksdorp (018) 462 1234 • Mafikeng (018) 381 4263 • Nelspruit (013) 755 3606 • Pietermaritzburg (033) 394 4444 • Pretoria (012) 804 3619 • Rustenburg 0861 322 322 • Vaal Triangle (016) 428 1640 • Western Cape (021) 461-1113 • West Rand (011) 953-4111 • Zululand (035) 789-2472
Police department	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 111 • Contact your local police station for a trauma counsellor or visit your local clinic.

Sources: Kidshealth.org, ngopulse.org, Counselling information Centre blaauwberg.net