



Patient education: Suicide prevention (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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Who is at risk for suicide?

Suicide is a serious health concern. It affects people of all ages, genders, and races. People at risk of suicide sometimes have something in their life that makes them more likely to have thoughts of suicide. Other people might also experience these things, but do not think about suicide.

People who think of suicide often have a history of:

- Mental health problems such as depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, or substance misuse
- Previous suicide attempt or thoughts of suicide
- Violence in the family, or physical or sexual abuse
- Mental health problems or suicide in the family
- Access to guns or other lethal ways of harming oneself
- Time in prison or jail
- Stressful events like job loss, bullying, or death of a family member
- A traumatic experience while being in the military or war

A suicide attempt is a sign of an extreme problem. A person who attempts or talks about suicide is not just looking for attention. They need professional help.

What should I do if I am thinking about suicide?

If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide, **get help right away!** For help, you can:

- Contact a suicide crisis hotline. In the US and Canada, call or text **988**.
 - Call for emergency help (in the US and Canada, **call 9-1-1**), or go to the nearest emergency department.
 - Call your mental health professional or doctor, and tell them it is urgent.
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Are there warning signs of suicide?

Suicide often happens after a stressful event in life. People who are thinking about suicide might:

- Talk about suicide, wanting to die, or wanting the pain to end
 - Feel hopeless, helpless, worthless, or trapped in a situation
 - Lose interest in activities, sports, or hobbies they used to enjoy
 - Act nervous or use poor judgment
 - Spend more time alone, or refuse to go to family or social activities
 - Sleep too much or too little
 - Tell people they might not be around anymore
 - Have sudden or big changes in behavior or mood
 - Believe death is the only answer to the problem
 - Use alcohol or drugs more than usual
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How can family and friends help?

If you notice someone showing warning signs of suicide, there are things you can do to help and support them:

- If the person says they are thinking about suicide, do not leave them alone. Stay with them and **call for help**:
 - In the US and Canada, contact the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. To speak to someone, call or text **988**. To talk to someone online, go to chat.988lifeline.org.
 - Call for emergency help (in the US and Canada, **call 9-1-1**), or take them to the nearest emergency department.
 - Call their mental health professional or doctor, and tell them it is urgent.

- If they are thinking about suicide, remove anything they could use to harm themselves. Make sure any guns are locked away safely. Remove any knives, ropes, and drugs.
- Don't be afraid to ask the person if they are thinking about suicide. Talking about the suicidal thoughts might help them. This will not give them the idea or make them more likely to act on their thoughts. People who have thoughts of suicide are not likely to reach out to others. Take their concerns seriously.
- Talk to the person in private, and share your concerns. Listen to the person and their story. This might help them feel less alone.
- Tell them their life matters to you. They likely feel alone and think no one cares.
- Do not promise to keep their suicidal thoughts a secret. Tell a trusted friend, family member, or adult.
- Encourage the person to seek treatment. Offer to help find a counselor or make an appointment. Offer to drive or go with them to be evaluated. Reassure them they can be helped, and life can get better.
- Be respectful. The person is having real feelings, even if they are not logical. Ask questions to learn more about their feelings and what is causing them. Do not try to talk them out of suicide by telling them things like "You have so much to live for" or "Things could be worse."

Family and friends can support each other through the difficult times of life. Here are some ways you can support others:

- Pay attention to what's going on in other people's lives. Talk with your family and friends if you notice a change in someone's behavior. This is very important if the change happens suddenly, or if you do not know the reason for the change.
- Listen closely to others, and ask questions to learn more. Be open, and do not judge. This can make it easier to talk about problems.
- Be a role model. Share your difficult times and what has worked to help you. It can help to see how others have dealt with family problems or hard times.

What can help protect people from suicide?

Some skills, behaviors, and factors can make a person less likely to have thoughts of suicide. They might also lower the risk of attempting or completing suicide. These things also help

people cope with stressful events. They include:

- Learning how to solve problems and manage conflicts in a healthy way
- Connecting with family, friends, and others in the community
- Having access to care for physical and mental health
- Getting treatment for mental health problems, including substance misuse
- Cultural beliefs that discourage suicide and encourage getting help
- Limiting access to things that could harm or kill a person, such as weapons

If you or someone you know is struggling, help is available.

More on this topic

[Patient education: Bipolar disorder \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Borderline personality disorder \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Depression in adults \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Depression in children and teens \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Generalized anxiety disorder \(The Basics\)](#)

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[Patient education: Bipolar disorder \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

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