

## **Middle and High School General Guidelines for Parents**

### **Youth Suicide in the United States\***

- Suicide is the third leading cause of death for youth aged 10-24 in the United States.\*
- In recent years more young people have died from suicide than from cancer, heart disease, HIV/AIDS, congenital birth defects, and diabetes combined.\*
- For every young person who dies by suicide, between 100-200 attempt suicide.\*
- Males are four times as likely to die by suicide as females - although females attempt suicide three times as often as males.\*

### **Youth Suicide Risk Factors**

While the path that leads to suicidal behavior is long and complex and there is no “profile” that predicts suicidal behavior with certainty, there are certain risk factors associated with increased suicide risk. In isolation, these factors are not signs of suicidal thinking. However, when present they signal the need to be vigilant for the warning signs of suicide. In addition, they are also appropriate targets for suicide prevention programs. Specifically, these risk factors include the following:

- History of depression, mental illness or substance/alcohol abuse disorders
- Presence of a firearm or rope
- Isolation or lack of social support
- Situational crisis
- Family history of suicide or suicide in community
- Hopelessness
- Impulsivity
- Incarceration

### **Serious Warning Signs**

Warning signs are observable behaviors that may signal the presence of suicidal thinking. They might be considered “cries for help” or “invitations to intervene.” These warning signs signal the need to inquire directly about whether the individual has thoughts of suicide. If such thinking is acknowledged, then suicide interventions will be required. Warning signs include the following:

- **Suicide threats.** It has been estimated that up to 80% of all suicide victims have given some clues regarding their intentions. Both direct (“I want to kill myself”) and indirect (“I wish I could fall asleep and never wake up”) threats need to be taken seriously.
- **Suicide notes and plans.** The presence of a suicide note is a very significant sign of danger. The greater the planning revealed by the youth, the greater the risk of suicidal behavior.
- **Prior suicidal behavior.** Prior behavior is a powerful predictor of future behavior. Thus anyone with a history of suicidal behavior should be carefully observed for future suicidal behavior.

- **Making final arrangements.** Making funeral arrangements, writing a will, and/or giving away prized possessions may be warning signs of impending suicidal behavior.
- **Preoccupation with death.** Excessive talking, drawing, reading, and/or writing about death may suggest suicidal thinking.
- **Changes in behavior, appearance, thoughts, and/or feelings.** Depression (especially when combined with hopelessness), sudden happiness (especially when preceded by significant depression), a move toward social isolation, giving away personal possessions, and reduced interest in previously important activities are among the changes considered to be suicide warning signs.

## SUICIDE IS PREVENTABLE

### Here is what YOU can do:

- **Talk** to your child about suicide, don't be afraid, you will not be "putting ideas into their heads." **Asking for help** is the single skill that will protect your child. **Help your child** to identify and connect to caring adults to talk to when they need guidance and support.
- Know the risk factors and warning signs of suicide.
- **Remain calm.** Establish a safe environment to talk about suicide.
- **Listen** without judging. Allow for the discussion of experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Be prepared for expression of intense feelings. Try to understand the reasons for considering suicide without taking a position about whether or not such behavior is justified. Ask open-ended questions.
- **Supervise** constantly. Do not leave your child alone.
- **Ask** if your child has a plan to kill themselves, and if so, remove means. As long as it does not put the caregiver in danger, attempt to remove the suicide means such as a firearm, knife or pills.
- **Take Action.** It is crucial to get professional help for your child and the entire family. When you are close to a situation it is often hard to see it clearly. You may not be able to solve the problem yourself.
  - Help may be found at a suicide prevention center, local mental health agency, family service agency or through your clergy.
  - Become familiar with the support services at your child's school. Contact the appropriate person(s) at the school, for example, the school social worker, school psychologist, school counselor, or school nurse.

If someone you know is in **IMMEDIATE** danger: call 9-1-1  
**National Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-800-273-8255**

\*M. Heron, D. L. Hoyert, S. L. Murphy, J. Xu, K. D. Kochanek, & B. Tejada-Vera. (2009, April). Deaths: Final Data for 2006. National Vital Statistics Reports, 57(14).