



Oregon Youth Suicide Awareness Campaign – Article #3

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Tips for Identifying Suicide Warning Signs in Youth

Children and teens may talk about suicide or show they are suicidal through their behaviors. It's clear when they speak directly about suicide. It's harder to identify the behaviors that are warning signs because they may be subtle. Adults should monitor closely when more than one warning sign is present. There also are circumstances in their lives that are risk factors for suicide.

Most people don't want to die. They want their pain to go away. About 80% of the time, people who kill themselves have given definite signals (through behaviors) or have talked about suicide. Often, peers and adults haven't been educated about the signals, don't know about them, so they are missed.

A key factor is change: the child or teen may "be different" than they were before. As adults, it often is easy to see when the behaviors of a child or teen changes. We may think they're just going through a phase, and might be. We may think they're just "trying to get attention". But they may be depressed or thinking of suicide. A happy person who gets good grades and is involved in many school activities, for example, may be pretending and they really are hurting emotionally. In those cases, **watching for changes in behavior can be helpful.**

Talking About Suicide

Children and teens may make comments that they're thinking of suicide to a peer, family member, or school personnel. Sometimes, when asked, they will say that they're "just joking". But suicide is serious. **It's important to take any statement seriously,** refer them to a school counselor or administrator and let the parents or guardians know. **If a child or youth is acutely suicidal, don't leave them alone.**

They may say things like:

- I don't want to live anymore or life isn't worth living
- I'm a burden to my family
- I don't have anyone to talk to about my feelings
- I'm sad most of the time
- I'm angry and agitated most of the time
- I'm being bullied
- I'm not going to be here in the future
- I don't have any friends
- I feel trapped
- I'm feeling unbearable pain
- Saying goodbye

Behaviors

Watch for changes in behavior that are out of the ordinary for this person.

- Previous suicide attempts
- Making a plan
- Giving away prized possessions
- Signs of depression, such as moodiness, hopelessness or withdrawal
- Not doing the things that used to cause them pleasure
- New or increased drug or alcohol use
- Dropping grades
- Trouble with the justice system
- Social withdrawal
- Writing or drawing about morbid topics, a preoccupation with death
- Going online to research suicide methods
- Impulsiveness and taking unnecessary risks
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Aggression or anxiety
- Having a mental illness
- Having a serious or chronic physical condition or pain

Circumstances

Pay particular attention to a student that is experiencing difficult circumstance such as:

- Loss of a friend or family member to suicide (recent or in the past)
- A relationship break up
- Conflict with parents or stressors at home
- Recent discipline at school or in extracurricular activities
- Exposure to news reports or social media about suicides by other young people
- Being benched or dropped from a sports team
- Readily accessible firearms or other lethal means
- Bullying or being bullied
- Humiliation
- Historical trauma (including minorities, LGBTQ youth, and Native Americans)

If you or someone you know is suicidal, crisis counselors are available at the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: phone (1-800-273-8255) or TEXT '273TALK' TO 839863.

For more information on warning signs and risk factors:

Youth Suicide Prevention Program: <https://www.yspp.org/about-suicide/warning-signs.htm>

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: <https://afsp.org/about-suicide/risk-factors-and-warning-signs/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: <https://afsp.org/about-suicide/risk-factors-and-warning-signs/>