



The Role of College Students in Preventing Suicide

Recognizing the Warning Signs

Helping Your Peers

Taking Care of Yourself

Resources

- **Resources for College Students**
- **General Resources on Suicide and Suicide Prevention**

Marty was a student at a very large East Coast university—the type of place where it was easy for someone to get lost. Attendance was never taken, and no one noticed if a student stopped showing up in a class of 200 or 300 students. The residence assistants in Marty’s dorms were graduate students. They cared about their students but had no systematic way of checking up on everyone. Marty started drifting from his friends. He was uncommunicative and withdrawn. He slept late and rarely left his room. When he did appear in the cafeteria or on the street, he looked more than a little frightened and unkempt. Everyone found it easier to avoid him than to confront him. Late one night, Marty tried to kill himself.

If you are thinking about suicide or hurting yourself, or if someone you know seems to be thinking about suicide, please talk to a responsible adult or call (800) 273-TALK (8255). This telephone hotline is available 24/7. The people who answer the phone will help you.

The Role of College Students in Preventing Suicide

College represents a huge transition for most young people. Many are living away from home for the first time. Even students who commute to school achieve a new level of independence and freedom in college. However, college also eliminates some of the safety nets available to young people living at home. It is easier for a young person’s problems to go unnoticed when he or she is away at college and not under the eyes of parents, old friends, and high school teachers. College also provides a new opportunity for young people to experiment with drugs or alcohol.

Why would someone want to die? Sometimes people want to die because they are suffering from a chemical imbalance that causes depression or another mental disorder—and college students may neglect to take medication prescribed for depression, hyperactivity, or other problems. They may also have a mental illness that causes them so much emotional pain and anguish, it prevents them from rationally considering other solutions to their problems. Incoming students may have particular difficulty adjusting to

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a new academic environment where the competition is more intense and the stakes are higher.

While you may not be able to solve these problems for a friend or classmate, you may be able to help the person find someone who can help. And the first step in doing so is recognizing the warning signs that someone is may be at risk of suicide.

Recognizing the Warning Signs

College students have their own culture and language. You may know your college friends better than their own parents do. And you may be able to tell that something is wrong with one of your classmates when the professors and faculty advisors can't. You can use your insights to help your friends and classmates find help when they are having problems.

While there is no foolproof method of determining that someone is thinking of hurting him- or herself, the following signs might indicate that a young person is considering suicide:

- **A suddenly worsening school performance.** Good students who suddenly start ignoring assignments and cutting classes may have problems—including depression or drug and alcohol abuse—that can affect their health and happiness and put them at risk of suicide.
- **A fixation with death or violence.** Young adults with problems may develop an unusual interest in death or violence, expressed through poetry, essays, doodling, or artwork; an obsession with violent movies, video games, and music; or a fascination with weapons. Older adults often cannot tell a “normal” interest in violent video games or music from an obsession, whereas peers know what is more typical for this age group.
- **Unhealthy peer relationships.** Students who don't have friends, or suddenly reject their friends, may be at risk. A friend who suddenly rejects you, claiming, “You just don't understand me any more,” may be having emotional problems.
- **Violent mood swings or a sudden change in personality.** Peers who become sullen, silent, and withdrawn, or angry and acting out, may have problems that can lead to suicide.
- **Indications that the student is in an abusive relationship.** Some young people may be physically or emotionally abused by a member of their family or their girlfriend or boyfriend. Signs that a person may be in an abusive relationship include unexplained bruises or other injuries that he or she refuses to discuss.
- **Signs of an eating disorder.** An eating disorder is an obvious sign that someone needs help. A dramatic change in weight that is not the result of a medically supervised diet may also indicate that something is wrong.
- **Difficulty in adjusting to gender identity.** Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered young people have higher suicide attempt rates than their heterosexual peers. These youth may be faced with social pressures that make life very difficult.

- **Depression.** Depression is an emotional problem that increases a person's risk of suicide. The following signs indicate that someone may be depressed:
 - A sudden worsening in school performance
 - Withdrawing from friends and extracurricular activities
 - Expressions of sadness and hopelessness, or anger and rage
 - A sudden, unexplained decline in enthusiasm and energy
 - Overreaction to criticism
 - Lowered self-esteem, or feelings of guilt
 - Indecision, lack of concentration, and forgetfulness
 - Restlessness and agitation
 - Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
 - Unprovoked episodes of crying
 - Sudden neglect of appearance and hygiene
 - Seeming to feel tired all the time, for no apparent reason
 - An increase in the use of alcohol or other drugs

Some warning signs of suicide demand immediate action:

- Announcing that the person has made a plan to kill him- or herself
- Talking or writing about suicide or death
- Saying things like:
 - *I wish I were dead.*
 - *I'm going to end it all.*
 - *You will be better off without me.*
 - *What's the point of living?*
 - *Soon you won't have to worry about me.*
 - *Who cares if I'm dead, anyway?*
- Staying by him- or herself rather than hanging out with friends
- Expressing the belief that life is meaningless
- Giving away prized possessions
- Neglecting his or her appearance and hygiene
- Obtaining a weapon or another means of hurting him- or herself (such as prescription medications)

Again, there is no foolproof way of knowing for sure that a teen is thinking of hurting him- or herself. These warning signs can also mean that a friend or classmate has serious problems. But by taking action, you can help that person become happier and healthier.

Helping Your Peers

If you think that any of your friends or classmates may be thinking of killing themselves, there are two important things you can do: Talk to them, and express your concern to a responsible adult.

Having someone to talk to can make a big difference. College students will often share secrets and feelings with their peers that they will not share with older adults. However,

you may need to be persistent before they are willing to talk. Ask them if they are thinking about killing themselves. Talking about suicide or suicidal thoughts will *not* push someone to kill themselves. It is also not true that people who talk about killing themselves will not actually try it. Take any expressed intention of suicide very seriously.

You should be especially concerned if people tell you that they have made a detailed suicide plan or obtained a means of hurting themselves. If they announce that they are thinking of taking an overdose of prescription medication or jumping from a particular bridge, stay with them until they are willing to go with you and talk to a responsible adult—or until a responsible adult can be found who will come to you.

Don't pretend you have all the answers. The most important thing you can do may be to help them find help. *Never* promise to keep someone's intention to kill him- or herself a secret.

If you have talked with a friend or classmate and think that person is in danger, yet the person refuses to get help, you need to talk to a responsible adult who can intervene. You should also find a responsible adult if your friend or classmate refuses to discuss the issue with you, or if you think that you don't know the person well enough to initiate a personal conversation.

Find someone who is concerned with and understands young people and can help. This might be a member of your friend's family, or it could be a residence assistant, a professor, an administrator, a member of the clergy, or someone who works in campus mental health services or the health clinic. If this adult doesn't take you or your friend's problem seriously or doesn't know what to do, talk to someone else. Most college campuses have a mental health or emergency support network that will respond to your concern.

Don't be afraid of being wrong. It is difficult for even experts to understand who is at serious risk of suicide and who is not. Many of the warning signs for suicide could also indicate problems with drug or alcohol abuse, domestic violence, depression, or another mental illness. Young people with these problems need help—and you can help.

Taking Care of Yourself

If you are thinking of hurting yourself, tell someone who can help. If you cannot talk to your parents, find someone else: a relative, a friend, or someone at your campus mental health services or health clinic. Or, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at (800) 273-TALK (8255).

Resources

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Resources for College Students

Publications

National Institute of Mental Health. (2000). *What do these students have in common?* Retrieved March 18, 2005, from <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/students.cfm>

This booklet from the National Institute of Mental Health describes how the stresses of college can lead to depression, and provides information on symptoms, causes, treatments, and getting help.

Websites

Campus Blues (<http://www.campusblues.com>) features information and resources for college students on mental health, anxiety, loneliness, alcohol abuse, gambling, and other social and emotional issues.

Go Ask Alice! (<http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/>) is a web-based health question-and-answer service produced by Alice!, Columbia University's Health Education Program. Go Ask Alice! provides information to help young people make better decisions concerning their health and well-being. Go Ask Alice! answers questions about relationships, sexuality, emotional health, alcohol and other drugs, and other topics. The addresses of e-mails sent to Go Ask Alice! are electronically scrambled to preserve the senders' confidentiality. Questions are answered by a team of Columbia University health educators and information and research specialists from other health-related organizations. The Go Ask Alice! archive on emotional health also contains information on suicide and depression.

Samaritans (<http://www.samaritans.org/>) is an organization based in the United Kingdom that offers 24-hour, confidential emotional support to people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair, including those feelings that may lead to suicide. The Samaritans operate a free and confidential e-mail service, which generally responds to your e-mail within 24 hours. You can send an e-mail to jo@samaritans.org or use the Samaritans website to send a confidential e-mail that cannot be traced back to your address.

Ulifeline.org (<http://www.ulifeline.org>) is a web-based resource created by the Jed Foundation to provide students with a non-threatening and supportive link to their

college's mental health center as well as important mental health information. Students are able to download information about various mental illnesses, ask questions, make appointments, and seek help anonymously via the Internet. Resources offered on Ulifeline.org include a customized version of Go Ask Alice! that allows students to have virtually any mental health question answered 24 hours a day; a mental health and drug information library that features consumer health information from Harvard Medical School; and the Duke Diagnostic Psychiatry Screening Program, which allows the Ulifeline user to be screened for different mental disorders. While this screening is not meant to take the place of an evaluation by a mental health professional, a positive result suggests that the student would benefit from comprehensive mental health screening.

General Resources on Suicide and Suicide Prevention

Suicide Prevention Resource Center (<http://www.sprc.org/>). The Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) provides prevention support, training, and materials to strengthen suicide prevention efforts. Among the resources found on its website is the SPRC Library Catalog (<http://library.sprc.org/>), a searchable database containing a wealth of information on suicide and suicide prevention, including publications, peer-reviewed research studies, curricula, and web-based resources. Many of these items are available online.

American Association of Suicidology (<http://www.suicidology.org/>). The American Association of Suicidology (AAS) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the understanding and prevention of suicide. It promotes research, public awareness programs, public education, and training for professionals and volunteers and serves as a national clearinghouse for information on suicide.

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (<http://www.afsp.org/>). The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) is dedicated to advancing our knowledge of suicide and our ability to prevent it. AFSP's activities include supporting research projects; providing information and education about depression and suicide; promoting professional education for the recognition and treatment of depressed and suicidal individuals; publicizing the magnitude of the problems of depression and suicide and the need for research, prevention, and treatment; and supporting programs for suicide survivor treatment, research, and education.

National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (<http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/>). The National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC), located at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is a valuable source of information and statistics about suicide, suicide risk, and suicide prevention. To locate information on suicide and suicide prevention, scroll down the left-hand navigation bar on the NCIPC website and click on "Suicide" under the "Violence" heading.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>). The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline provides immediate assistance to individuals in suicidal crisis by connecting them to the nearest available suicide prevention and mental health service provider through a toll-free telephone number: (800) 273-TALK (8255).

Technical assistance, training, and other resources are available to the crisis centers and mental health service providers that participate in the network of services linked to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

Suicide Prevention Action Network USA (<http://www.spanusa.org>). Suicide Prevention Action Network USA (SPAN USA) is the nation's only suicide prevention organization dedicated to leveraging grassroots support among suicide survivors (those who have lost a loved one to suicide) and others to advance public policies that help prevent suicide.