

# Suicide: Warning Signs and Treatment

It is reported that suicide, the act of deliberately ending one's own life, is a cause of death for about 30,000 people (including 5,000 between the ages of 15 to 24 years old) each year in the United States. Since many suicides are not reported as such, the actual number is most likely much higher. Suicide goes unreported because of its stigma or because family members find it too painful to confront the truth.

The rate of suicide in this country is about 12 per 100,000 people, making it the ninth leading cause of death in the United States during the years from 1993 to 1995. According to the American Association of Suicidology (which studies suicide and its prevention), there are between eight and 20 attempts at suicide for each death from suicide. This means that there are anywhere from 240,000 to 600,000 suicide attempts each year. This rate jumps to 200 attempts for every completed suicide when young people (ages 15 to 24) are involved.

## Other Facts about Suicide

- In the U.S., Nevada has the highest rate of suicide.
- More suicides happen in the spring than at other times of the year.
- The most lethal days of the week are Monday and Friday.
- Rich people and poor people alike kill themselves. Suicide is an equal-opportunity killer, and is chosen by people from every group imaginable. The most common victims are white males aged 65 and older.
- More men than women kill themselves, but women are more likely to attempt suicide.
- 60% of people who commit suicide do so with guns.

## Why People Commit Suicide

There are many reasons why people kill themselves, and we seldom know why certain individuals choose this route. The following factors seem to play a role in many suicides, but none of them guarantees that a person will end his or her life. Often it is a combination of factors that seem to interact with a person's circumstances; the factors are unique for each person. Some of these factors include:

**Clinical depression.** This type of depression is much more than just a simple case of the blues; it is severe and debilitating. It may surprise you to know that people who suffer from depression are at the greatest risk for suicide after they have begun treatment and are beginning to feel better. The reason for this is that when a person is severely depressed, they may lack the energy to carry out suicide. When they begin to recover and feel better, their energy begins to return and they may carry it out then.

**Alcoholism and drug abuse** are associated with a higher suicide rate because these substances impair judgment. Over half of all adolescent suicides and suicide attempts are associated with alcohol. When a person is under the influence of alcohol, he or she has fewer inhibitions and may also think and act in ways that would never happen when sober. Alcoholism and drug abuse also create additional stresses in the lives of users and may result in depression and a tendency toward desperate behavior.

**Mental illness.** People who have certain disorders, such as schizophrenia, have a higher risk of suicide.

**Physical illness,** including terminal illness and the illnesses common as people age, is often a factor that contributes to people taking their own lives.

**Feeling hopeless** is very common among people who commit suicide. Hopelessness may be part of clinical depression, or it may be the result of an illness or other dire circumstance. When a person feels hopeless, he or she feels trapped, and suicide may seem like the only way out.

**Anger** motivates some people to commit suicide. After a long, unhappy relationship and years of building anger, these people see their suicide as a dramatic way to send a message of retribution.

A **sudden loss** may precipitate suicide in some people. The shock and grief of an enormous loss—of a person or a job—may drive a person to such an extreme.

Experiencing a **scandal** or **extreme embarrassment** leads some people to feel so trapped in their situation that they can think of no other way out.

## **Suicide Warning Signs**

One expert says that eight out of 10 people who kill themselves have given clear warnings that they were considering suicide. While these warning signs can be evident for almost anyone at some point in their life, it is important to be aware of them and take them seriously when you see them.

- Making a threat of suicide, e.g., “I wish I were dead,” “I’m going to end it.”
- Expressing hopelessness, helplessness, worthlessness
- Talking about death
- Having previous suicide attempts
- Seeming depressed, moody, or angry
- Having trouble at school or at work
- Abusing alcohol or drugs
- Taking risks
- Withdrawing from other people
- Behaving differently or oddly
- Sleep difficulties
- Loss of appetite
- Giving away prized possessions.
- Suddenly seeming happy after exhibiting several of the behaviors listed above.

## **Treatment**

The treatment for a suicidal person varies, depending on severity and the underlying cause. Treatment can range from immediate hospitalization to weekly psychotherapy with a licensed mental health professional. It may also include antidepressant medication or treatment for drug or alcohol addiction.

## **What to Do if Someone Is Suicidal**

Take action immediately. Depending on the urgency of the situation, call your doctor, hospital, mental health center, suicide hotline, or police emergency number (911).