



How do I know if my child is at risk for suicide?

Having thoughts of suicide is usually an indicator of an underlying mental health condition, like depression. Below is a list of potential warning signs to look for in your children or your children's friends. These are just potential warning signs and do not automatically mean that your child is considering suicide. We have included ways of how to best support your child if you notice warning signs.

Verbal Saying things such as:

- I want to kill myself.
- I wish I was dead.
- I don't want to be here anymore.
- No one understands me.
- I can't take it anymore.
- Things will never get better.
- I'm tired of being a burden to my friends and family.
- No one would miss me if I were gone/my friends and family are better off without me.
- I can't do anything right.
- I wish I could go to sleep and never wake up.

Physical Changes

- Significant change in appetite or weight.
- Suddenly not caring about appearances or cleanliness, low motivation for personal hygiene.
- Unexplained cuts, scrapes or bruises.
- Low energy, sleeping too much or too little.
- Persistent physical symptoms such as aches, pains, headaches, cramps or digestive issues.

Changes in Behavior

- Changes in mood: feeling unusually sad, irritable, or anxious for 2 or more weeks.
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits.
- Engaging in risky behaviors: not taking prescribed medication, ignoring physical limitations, using more drugs or alcohol, unsafe sexual behaviors, running away, shoplifting, property destruction.
- Loss of concentration.
- Withdrawing from friends and family.
- Losing interest in the things that used to be enjoyed.
- Feeling hopeless or helpless.
- Engaging in self-harm behaviors (cutting, burning, purposely hurting self).
- Thinking and talking about death/suicide a lot.
- Goodbye notes/letters or posts on social media, giving away prized possessions.

Possible Environmental Stressors

- Grief and loss of having lost a loved one, relationship or job.
- Having questions or worries about sexual or gender identity.
- Previous suicide attempts or self-injurious behaviors.
- Conflicts in an important relationship (significant other, best friend or parental).
- Challenges at work or school, decline in academic function or college rejection.
- Social isolations, significant change in peer group, bullying.

Discussing Concerns with Your Student

Ask: “Are you thinking about suicide?” in a caring yet straightforward manner

- Scientific evidence encourages talking to youth about suicide and suicidal thoughts or behavior. Directly ask about suicide and discuss suicide openly in a calm and collaborative dialogue. The more open you are about suicide, the more people feel safe to talk about their feelings and thoughts.
- Be non-judgmental and offer words of encouragement, validation, and acceptance. Avoid making them feel embarrassed, ashamed, or guilty.
- Do not have your student make promises to not engage in self-harm and not share with others.

After every question, listen for:

- Their response. Allow space for the conversation. If your student has few words, allow a time for silence rather than ending the conversation.
- Their reasons. What are their triggers for wanting to end their life? This will help you understand current concerns in their life and look out for warning signs in the future.
- Hope. Protective factors are reasons for wanting to live. Most suicidal people do not want to die or kill their self; they want the emotional pain to stop.

Ask: “What were/are your plans and thoughts exactly? Do you have any items you were planning to use to hurt yourself?”

- Know the facts so you can keep your child safe.
- Put a stop to their plan. Make sure you remove items from your child’s reach and possession.
- Lock up sharp objects when there is intent for self-injurious behavior. Lock up medications when there is substance use or as a precaution. Lock up all guns and ammunition.

Ask: “What did you do in response to these thoughts?”

- These can show you ways that your child has been keeping themselves safe.
- Positive coping skills are a protective factor.
- Explore positive and safe outlets for their feelings.

You are not in this alone. You have resources! If you are concerned, below are the recommended steps to keep you and your family safe:

- Talk with school staff, including the School Counselor, Principal, or Vice Principal.
- Reach out to therapist, doctor, or other Health Care Professional to discuss options.
- Call the San Diego Access and Crisis Line, 1-888-724-7240, or text “HOME” to the Access and Crisis Text Line 741-741. Both are available 24 hours a day/7 days a week.
- Emergencies: 911 and ask for the PERT team if possible.
 - If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis, you can call 911 or your local Sheriff’s Office and ask for PERT (Psychiatric Emergency Response Team). PERT provides clinical support to law enforcement and the community for calls involving persons having a mental health crisis.
- Emergency Screening Unit: 619-876-4502
 - The Emergency Screening Unit (ESU) provides emergency psychiatric evaluations, crisis intervention, crisis stabilization, brief outpatient counseling, case management and emergency medication management to children and adolescents under 18 years.

Adapted from Needham ACTS website, http://needhamacts.org/parents/at_risk.htm and LivingWorks’ Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST).