

WARNING SIGNS FOR SUICIDAL BEHAVIOUR

Warning signs are changes in a person's behaviours, feelings, and beliefs about themselves that are out of character for that person that may indicate increased risk of a suicidal behaviour. It may also be possible for a young person to become suicidal without exhibiting these signs or behaviours. For some young people suicidal behaviour may occur impulsively, especially if coupled with use of alcohol. Young people can also mask their distress with reckless, impulsive and aggressive behaviour.

Common warning signs for suicidal behaviour include recent or sudden changes in the following areas:

Changes in behaviour

- Isolation or withdrawal from other people.
- Loss of interest in previous liked activities.
- Unexpected reduction in performance at school, work or sport.
- Significant changes in attendance patterns.
- Crying a lot.
- New involvement in high risk activities.
- Putting affairs in order.
- Giving away personal effects or prized possessions.

Changes in mood

- Sadness, hopelessness, anxiety, desperation, anger, irritability, moodiness, aggressiveness, marked emotional instability.

Changes in thinking

- Poor concentration.
- Inability to make decisions.
- Low self-esteem.
- Inappropriate feelings of guilt.

Physical changes

- Loss of weight or weight gain.
- Loss of appetite or increase in appetite.
- Loss of energy.
- Changes in sleep patterns: difficulty sleeping or oversleeping.
- Chronic physical complaints, eg., headaches, stomach aches, fatigue.

Preoccupation with death

- Preoccupation with artwork, reading or writing about death.
- Preoccupation with thinking about someone who has died.

Talk of suicide

- Making statements like “I would be better off dead” “What’s the point in living”.
- Making threats of wanting to end it all or suicide.
- Discussing/ asking about methods of suicide.
- Making plans for suicide.

Stress, loss

- (Perceived) intolerable loss or stress.
- Recent death or suicide amongst family or friends.
- Recent family break-up.
- Recent relationship break-up.

Apparent resolution

- Sudden appearance of happiness/calmness after a period of some of the characteristics listed above.

What to do

Here are some ways to be helpful to someone where there are concerns about suicide:

- Be direct. Talk openly and matter-of-factly about suicide.
- Be willing to listen. Allow expressions of feelings and accept feelings.
- Be non-judgemental. Don’t debate whether suicide is right or wrong, or feelings are good or bad. Don’t lecture on the value of life.
- Get involved, be available, show interest and support.
- Don’t dare the person to go ahead.
- Don’t act shocked. This will put distance between you.
- Don’t be sworn to secrecy. Seek support and help.
- Offer hope that alternatives are available but do not offer glib reassurance.
- Take action. Remove means, such as guns/ropes/hoses/pills.
- Get help from persons or agencies specialising in mental health, including psychiatric emergency services.

References

1. Question, Persuade, Refer. *Level I Training: QPR Suicide Screening*, www.qpr.org.nz.
2. Youth Suicide Prevention Gatekeeper Training.
3. *Teen Suicide and Youth Suicide*. Canterbury Suicide Project.