



## Ten Things Parents Can Do to Prevent Suicide

### 1. Don't let a teenager's depression or anxiety snowball.

Maybe your child is merely having a bad day, but maybe it's something more. Nine in ten adolescents who take their own lives were previously diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder—more than half of them with a mood disorder such as depression. Depressed people often retreat into themselves, when secretly they're crying out to be rescued. Many times they're too embarrassed to reveal their unhappiness to others, including Mom and Dad. Boys in particular may try to hide their emotions, in the misguided belief that displaying vulnerability is a fifty-foot-high neon sign of weakness.

Let's not wait for youngsters to come to us with their problems. Knock on the door, park yourself on the bed, and say, "You seem sad. Would you like to talk about it? Maybe I can help."

### 2. Listen to your teenager—even when she's not talking.

Not all, but most kids who are contemplating suicide (this is called suicidal *ideation*) tip off their troubled state of mind through troubled behaviors. Studies have found that one trait common to families shattered by a son's or daughter's suicide is poor communication between parents and child.

*If your instinct tells you that a teenager might be a danger to himself, heed your instincts and don't allow him to be left alone. In this situation, it is better to overreact than to underreact.*

### 3. Never shrug off threats of suicide as typical teenage melodrama.

"Any written or verbal statement of 'I want to die' or 'I don't care anymore' should be treated seriously," says psychologist Helen Pratt. "Often, children who attempt suicide had been telling their parents *repeatedly* that they intended to kill themselves." Conventional wisdom holds that people who openly threaten suicide don't really intend to take their own lives; the threat is a desperate plea for help. While that is true much of the time, what mother or father would want to risk being wrong?

Any of these other red flags warrants your immediate attention:

- "Nothing matters."
- "I wonder how many people would come to my funeral?"
- "Sometimes I wish I could just go to sleep and never wake up."
- "Everyone would be better off without me."
- "You won't have to worry about me much longer."

When a teenager starts dropping thinly veiled comments like that or comes right out and admits to feeling suicidal, try not to react with shock ("What are you, crazy?!") or scorn ("That's a ridiculous thing to say!"). Above all, don't tell her, "You don't mean that!"—though you'd probably be right. Be willing to listen nonjudgmentally to what he's *really* saying, which is: "*I need your love and attention because I'm in tremendous pain, and I can't seem to stop it on my own.*"

To see your child so distraught would tear at the heart of any parent. Nevertheless, the immediate focus has to be on consoling him; you'll tend to your feelings later. In a calm voice, you might say, "I see. You must really, really be hurting inside."

“Honey, plenty of people feel that way at one time or another. They may really mean it at that moment, but that’s because they’re depressed. Depression is an illness of the mind. Not only does it make you sadder than you’ve ever felt before, it takes control of your thoughts so that you can’t see any way out of your sadness. I know that right now it probably seems like it will last forever. But it won’t. We love you so much. Please let us get you the right help that will make your sadness go away.”

#### **4. Seek professional help right away.**

If your teenager’s behavior has you concerned, don’t wait to contact your pediatrician.

#### **5. Share your feelings.**

Let your teen know he’s not alone and that everyone feels sad or depressed now and then, including moms and dads. Without minimizing his anguish, reassure him that these bad times won’t last forever. Things truly *will* get better.

#### **6. Encourage him not to isolate himself from family and friends.**

It’s usually better to be around other people than to be alone. But don’t push if he says no.

#### **7. Recommend exercise.**

Physical activity as simple as walking or as vigorous as pumping iron can put the brakes on mild to moderate depression. There are several theories why. One is that working out causes a gland in the brain to release *endorphins*, a substance believed to improve mood and ease pain. Endorphins also lower the amount of *cortisol* in the circulation. Cortisol, a hormone, has been linked to depression.

Two other benefits of exercise: It distracts people from their problems and makes them feel better about themselves. Experts recommend working out for thirty to forty minutes a day, two to five times per week. Any form of exercise will do; what matters most is that youngsters enjoy the activity.

#### **8. Urge your teen not to demand too much of herself right now.**

Until therapy begins to take effect, this is probably not the time to assume responsibilities that could prove overwhelming. Suggest that she divide large tasks into smaller, more manageable ones whenever possible and participate in favorite, low-stress activities. The goal is to rebuild confidence and self-esteem.

#### **9. Remind a teenager undergoing treatment not to expect immediate results.**

Talk therapy and/or medication usually take time to improve mood, so he shouldn’t become discouraged or blame himself if he doesn’t feel better right away.

#### **10. If you keep guns at home, store them safely or move all firearms elsewhere until the crisis has passed.**

In 1997 there were 4,186 suicides among young people aged fifteen to twenty-four, three in five of which involved guns. Most of the victims were male. Whereas men typically end their lives through violent means, women generally choose the less reliable method of overdosing on drugs. If you suspect your son or daughter might be suicidal, it would be wise to keep all firearms, alcohol and medications under lock and key.

**Source:** [Caring for Your Teenager](#) (Copyright © 2003 American Academy of Pediatrics)

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