

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 himself/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.

A fixation with death or violence. Young adults with problems may develop an unusual interest in death or violence, expressed through poetry, essays, 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 anymore,” 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 Peers who become sullen, silent and withdrawn, or angry and acting out, may have problems that can lead to suicide.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.

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
- Withdrawal 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
- 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

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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.

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 themselves rather than hanging out with friends
- Expressing feelings that life is meaningless
- Giving away prized possessions
- Neglecting their appearance and hygiene
- Obtaining a weapon or other things that they could use to hurt themselves (such as prescription medications)

Again, there is no foolproof way of knowing for sure that a teen or young adult is thinking of hurting himself/herself. But even if the person isn’t thinking of suicide, these warning signs can mean that he or she has other serious problems. By taking action, you can help that person become happier and healthier.

