

Facts About Suicide and Mental Disorders in Adolescents

from *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*

Suicide is not inexplicable and is not simply the result of stress or difficult life circumstances. The key suicide risk factor is an undiagnosed, untreated, or ineffectively treated mental disorder. Research shows that over 90 percent of people who die by suicide have a mental disorder at the time of their death.

In teens, the mental disorders most closely linked to suicide risk are major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, conduct disorder, substance use disorder, and eating disorders. While in some cases these disorders may be precipitated by environmental stressors, they can also occur as a result of changes in brain chemistry, even in the absence of an identifiable or obvious “reason.”

Suicide is almost always complicated. In addition to the underlying disorders listed above, suicide risk can be affected by personality factors such as impulsivity, aggression, and hopelessness. Moreover, suicide risk can also be exacerbated by stressful life circumstances such as a history of childhood physical and/or sexual abuse; death, divorce, or other trauma in the family; persistent serious family conflict; traumatic breakups of romantic relationships; trouble with the law; school failures and other major disappointments; and bullying, harassment, or victimization by peers.

It is important to remember that the vast majority of teens who experience even very stressful life events do *not* become suicidal. In some cases, such experiences can be a catalyst for suicidal behavior in teens who are already struggling with depression or other mental health problems. In others, traumatic experiences can precipitate depression, anxiety, abuse of alcohol or drugs, or another mental disorder, which can increase suicide risk. Conversely, existing mental disorders may also lead to stressful life experiences such as family conflict, social isolation, relationship breakups, or school failures, which may exacerbate the underlying illness and in turn increase suicide risk.

Warning Signs of Suicide

These signs may mean someone is at risk for suicide. Risk is greater if a behavior is new or has recently increased in frequency or intensity, and if it seems related to a painful event, loss, or change.

- Talking about wanting to die or kill oneself
- Looking for ways to kill oneself, such as searching online or buying a gun
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious or agitated, or behaving recklessly
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings