

Frequently Asked Questions for Parents

Q: Who considers suicide?

A: In general, people (of all ages) who are depressed or having trouble coping with their feelings may consider suicide if they don't have other coping skills. People of all ages, races, faiths, and cultures die by suicide, as do individuals from all walks of life and all income levels. Both popular, well-connected people who seem to have everything going for them and those who are less well-off die by suicide. Suicidal youth come from all kinds of families, rich and poor, happy and sad, two-parent and single-parent. It is really important to understand that suicidal behavior knows no boundaries.

Q: Can a teen really be suicidal? They haven't lived long enough to know what real problems are!

A: In part, that is exactly the problem. It is widely believed that childhood is free from the stress and problems of adult life and is a time for fun. However, the world is a much different place now than it was when you were a teenager. We live in an information-packed and high-stress society. Competition for college acceptance and jobs is fierce. Teens are expected to go to school full-time, participate in school activities, work twenty to twenty-five hours a week in their "part-time job," and manage to get their chores and homework done on the side. It doesn't leave much time for fun. Many teens don't get enough sleep. This tends to make teens easily frustrated and angry. The expectations placed on teens in our society can be very difficult to handle, as they have not yet developed the skills needed to deal with these stresses. A loss that seems minor to an adult can feel life-threatening to teens if they cannot find a way to cope with the feelings or find a solution. Also, they feel the need to solve the problem as fast as they can in a culture obsessed with "now" (e-mail, voice mail, cell phones, pagers, etc.). For teens, each day is as big as it gets.

Q: Why do people choose to die by suicide?

A: Suicidal behavior is one of the most complicated human behaviors. This question cannot be answered briefly. There is no research that shows that a certain set of risk factors can accurately predict the likelihood of imminent danger of suicide for any one person. It is fair to say that suicidal people are experiencing varying degrees of outside stresses, internal conflict, and neurobiological dysfunction, and these factors contribute to their state of mind. Depression, anxiety, conduct disorders, and substance abuse all contribute to the possibility of suicide, but they do not cause suicide. A "final straw" for suicide is usually the last thing that a person who kills himself or herself is thinking about, and many left behind want to blame that person or event, but the "final straw" was *not* the cause of the suicide. Many people who

kill themselves had no final straw that others could see. The reasons behind a suicide often remain a mystery.

Q: Won't people think I am a bad parent if my teen is suicidal?

A: Some people may be quick to judge and not understand that given a certain set of circumstances any of us could feel suicidal. It is more likely that people will think you are a loving and caring parent if you are helping to keep your teen alive. Mental health professionals, in particular, deal with suicidal individuals every day. They understand how difficult life can be for a teen and that parents cannot protect their children from all the stress in the world. What you can do is listen to your teen and take action when he or she cannot. Take care of your teen.

Q: Every time I ask, my teen tells me that I won't understand. How can I help her to talk?

A: Acknowledge that you might not understand, but that you care very much and you will try to understand. Also keep in mind that this phrase tends to be used when teens can't explain how they feel. Another option is to tell her you understand she doesn't want to talk to you, but would she agree to talk about it with someone else, like a counselor? If she agrees, make sure to follow up on it; you can even make the initial call yourself if she wants you to.

Q: My teenager listens to horrible music. I'm worried that the violent lyrics will make him kill himself.

A: While you may not like your teen's choice in music, it is unlikely to make him kill himself if that was not already an issue. In fact, for most teens, music, even violent music, may actually allow them to vent some of their anger and frustration and help them to feel better. However, there are situations where a teenager who is already feeling depressed or feeling alienated may choose a certain type of music that can make those feelings stronger. Discuss your concerns with your teen and make a deal that if he feels like hurting or killing himself that he will talk to you.

Q: How can I help my child not to feel suicidal?

A: This begins by talking about suicide before it becomes an issue and the teen is in crisis. We need to acknowledge that suicide is an option that teens consider and open the channels of communication so that teens have somewhere to turn where they know they will be understood. One of the major reasons why teens don't turn to adults is that they feel they will not be understood. The Web site of the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide (www.sptsnj.org) can help to educate you about suicide and what you can do.

Q: I think my child may be suicidal. What do I say to him?

A: Suicide can be a difficult topic to discuss, especially with teens. Some possible conversation starters include:

- You haven't seemed like yourself recently. What's been going on?
- I know that some difficult things have happened recently. I'm concerned about how you're feeling.

Once you've opened up conversation, it's important to ask directly about suicidal intent. The following questions may be useful.

- Do you feel like things will never get better?
- Have you been feeling like killing yourself is an answer to your problem?
- Have you ever thought about suicide? Are you suicidal now?

If your child is suicidal, it is important to remove all lethal means from the household and get help. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-TALK) can be accessed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and will help you to determine what type of intervention is necessary. Even if your child does not indicate that he or she is feeling suicidal, seeking out help is always an option—from a school counselor, professional counselor, clergy person, and so forth.

Q: What should I do if my teen is talking about killing herself?

A: *Lifelines* recommends you follow the same three basic suicide intervention steps that have been outlined for school faculty, staff, and students:

1. Show you care: listen carefully.
2. Ask about suicide: ask directly in a caring, nonconfrontational way.
3. Get help: stay with the person; call your local crisis line, the national hotline, or other source of help.