

Let's Talk: Suicide awareness and risk

Presenter – Aimee Prange, Licensed Clinician

Hi, I'm Aimee. Did you know that each year more than 44,000 Americans die by suicide on average, that's 121 individuals who die by suicide each day, with firearms accounting for more than 50% of all suicides. Suicides are the 10th leading cause of death in the United States. These statistics are staggering and the numbers continue to go up each year.

Learn more to help

Suicide can be a very scary topic to talk about and hear about. Understanding more about suicide can help you identify when someone may be struggling and start the conversation. Some people think that by talking about suicide or asking questions about suicide, that you will encourage someone to engage in the act, but these are just myths. Talking about suicide and having an open, honest conversation may actually bring relief to someone who is at risk or thinking of suicide.

Why does suicide happen?

While there is no single cause for suicide, suicide occurs when one's stressors exceed their current coping abilities. I'm going to share with you some of the characteristics or factors that increase the chance that a person you know may take their life. I'm going to break these characteristics into three categories, including health factors, environmental factors, and historical factors.

Health factors

Health factors may include mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety. They may also include disorders such as drug and alcohol disorders, serious chronic health conditions, and chronic pain conditions. Some individuals may have a combination or more than one of these conditions.

Environmental factors

Environmental factors may include the death of a loved one, divorce or job loss. There may be prolonged stress factors such as bullying, relationship problems, and unemployment. Individuals who have access to lethal means, such as firearms and drugs, are at especially high risk. Witnessing another person's suicide or exposure to a graphic or traumatic event such as suicide may also place someone at risk.

Historical factors

Lastly, we have historical factors. This includes individuals who may have had a previous suicide attempt. We know that those who have attempted suicide in the past are more likely to be at risk to try it again. Another historical factor may be that someone has lost a loved one to suicide or may know someone who has attempted suicide and this may also place them at risk.

Know what to look for

So now that we know some of the risk factors that someone may be at a higher risk for taking their life, it's also important to be aware of the warning signs or possible red flags that someone has been seriously thinking about taking their life. When an individual has a change in behavior or is engaging in new and possibly risky behaviors, we should take these warnings very seriously. If a person who is sounding hopeless starts making statements that their life has no purpose, that they may feel like they're a burden to others, that they are experiencing extreme pain, be it physical or emotional, or that they have no reason to live and that they want to kill themselves, we should take all of these as very serious warnings. A person may also start increasing or start engaging in the use of drugs and alcohol. They may start researching ways to kill themselves. And they may start isolating from others and leaving social situations away from friends and family. Some individuals begin to give away their personal possessions that were once very meaningful and start saying goodbye.

Visual cue:

Warning signs of suicide

- Changing behavior and possibly taking more risks
- Making statement of physical or emotional pain, or hopelessness
- Using drugs or alcohol
- Researching methods of suicide
- Withdrawing from friends and family
- Giving away possessions
- Saying goodbye

Protective factors

You may be thinking to yourself, is there anything that people can do to help protect themselves from the risk factors of suicide, and the answer is yes. These are called protective factors. Ensuring that people have access to effective behavioral health care is essential to suicide prevention, especially for those at risk. Social supports and feeling connected is a crucial protective factor. Research shows that those who have a greater sense of connection to friends, family, and other social supports have a decreased chance that they will engage in suicidal acts. Life skills are another important protective factor for suicide. Life skills include things like critical thinking, stress management, conflict resolution, problem solving, and coping skills. Individuals with strong life skills are more likely to be able to adapt when faced with stressful situations. Positive self esteem and a sense of purpose or self worth in life can also reduce the risk of suicide. And lastly, those who have cultural, religious, or spiritual beliefs that support self preservation have also been found to be important protective factors.

Help make a difference

Now that you know the risk factors, the warning signs, and the potential protective factors for suicide, don't be afraid to speak up if you or someone you know is struggling. Help is always available. Consider signing up for a mental health first aid class to learn more about mental health disorders and suicide crisis prevention by going to [Mental Health First Aid USA](#). For additional resources, consider going to the [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#). If you are in immediate crisis, dial 1-800-273-TALK or you can also text the crisis text line at 741-741.

Visual cue:

Please note that there may be many other explanations for any or all of the afore delineated [behaviors/characteristics/symptoms]. This information is not intended to be an exhaustive list of all signs concerning such delineated [behaviors/characteristics/symptoms] or warning signs of suicide and should not be used as a stand-alone instrument. Each potential situation presents its own unique set of challenges.

Information is not a substitute for diagnosis, treatment or professional health care and is not meant to replace the advice of a health care professionals. Contact a health care professional with any questions or concerns about specific health care needs.

Sources:

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. [Suicide Statistics](#). 2017. Accessed October 9, 2017

National Council for Behavioral Health. Mental Health First Aid USA; First Edition (Revised) Adult. Washington, DC; National Council for Behavioral Health; 2015 p.2-13

National Institute of Mental Health. [Suicide](#). 2017. Accessed October 9, 2017

Suicide Prevention Lifeline. [Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Glossary](#). 2017. Accessed October 9, 2017

Suicide Prevention Resource Center, & Rodgers, P. Understanding risk and protective factors for suicide: A primer for preventing suicide. Newton, MA; Education Development Center, Inc. 2011

Aetna

Aetna is the brand name used for products and services provided by one or more of the Aetna group of subsidiary companies (Aetna).

This material is for informational purposes only. Information is believed to be accurate as of the production date; however, it is subject to change.

©2018 Aetna, Inc.

48.27.904.1 (11/18)