

Confronting Suicide



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Recognizing the Warning Signs

People who think about killing themselves typically do not talk about these thoughts with anyone. More often, they hide their pain and continue with their everyday routines. This is why learning about the warning signs, how to recognize them, and how to respond matters. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention notes that changes in personality and behavior and certain statements can be an indicator of a person in distress. If people know about these signs, they can take action and offer support when it matters most. As Dr. Christine Yu Moutier, chief medical officer of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, explains, “Just like most Americans know the basics for reducing risk of death from heart disease, we should all learn the risk factors and warning signs for suicide, how to have confident, real conversations involving mental health, and be familiar with the resources available for people who need help.”²⁹

“Just like most Americans know the basics for reducing risk of death from heart disease, we should all learn the risk factors and warning signs for suicide.”²⁹

—Christine Yu Moutier, chief medical officer of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

Watch for Signs

One of the first signs that friends or peers might be struggling and contemplating suicide is a noticeable change in their behavior and personality. When someone who is active in school clubs or sports suddenly loses interest in or drops out of these activities, it could be a warning sign. Similarly, when a teen who usually loves

school starts skipping classes, that could also be a sign of distress that can lead to suicidal thinking. Changes in sleep patterns, increased use of drugs or alcohol, and reckless behaviors—such as unsafe sex or reckless driving—can also be warning signs. As for personality changes, someone who is typically outgoing may become quiet and detached, or someone who is typically easygoing may have sudden and uncharacteristic bursts of anger.

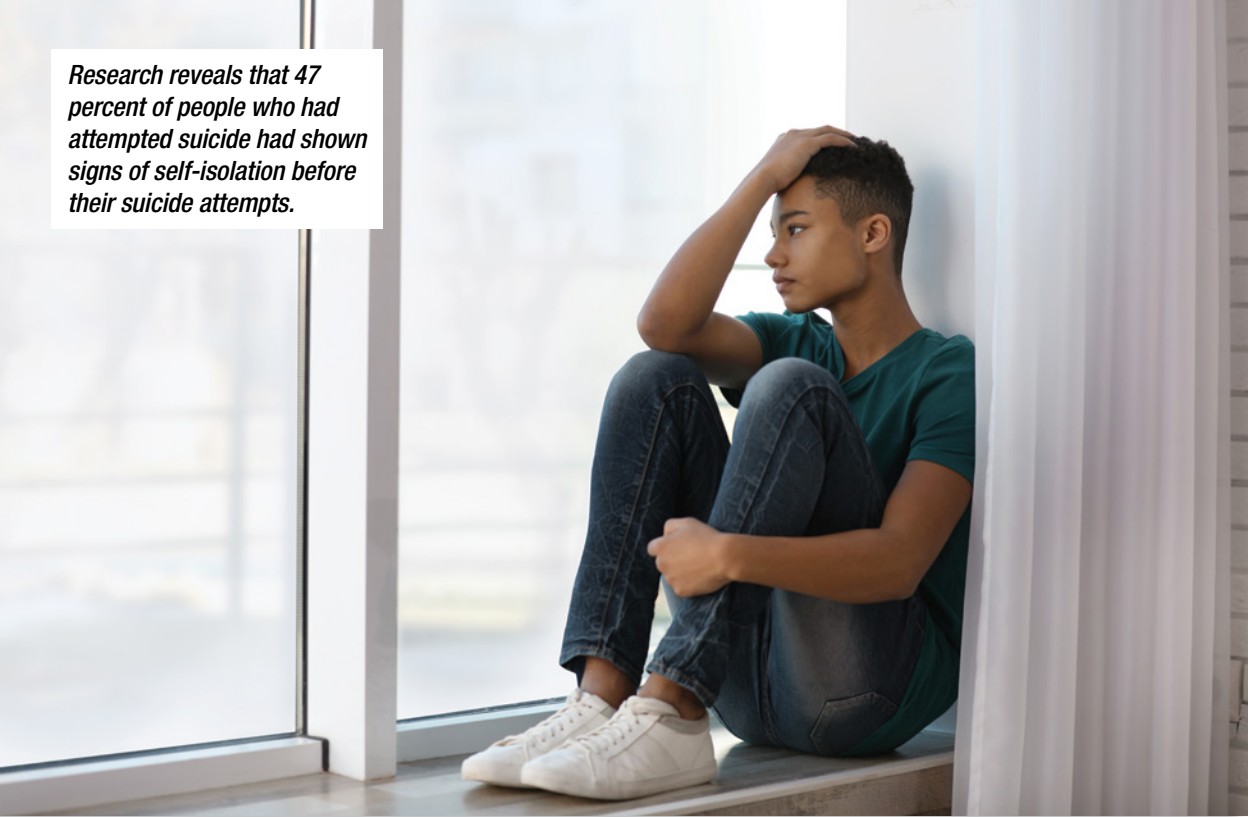
The link between suicide risk and changes in personality and behavior is supported by research. An example is a 2021 study published in *European Psychiatry*. That study involved 278 people who had attempted suicide. Research revealed that 47.1 percent of these individuals had shown signs of self-isolation before their suicide attempts. They were avoiding interaction with others and stepping away from their usual activities and groups. The study also found that 46.6 percent had displayed behavioral changes, such as avoiding communicating with friends, and 24.8 percent had experienced heightened anxiety or agitation.

Immediate Risk

While personality changes can be warning signs, some behaviors indicate a more immediate risk. These signs, according to the renowned academic medical center Cleveland Clinic, include talking about wanting to harm or kill oneself, writing about death or suicide, giving away personal belongings, and expressing hopelessness or a lack of purpose. Daniel Reidenberg, psychologist and managing director of the National Council for Suicide Prevention, says to be alert to “anyone talking about a sense of being hopeless, like there’s no hope anymore for them, there’s no future for them, or that there’s no purpose for them to be alive, no reason for them, they don’t have anything left to contribute to their family, to their friends, to society, or to the world.”³⁰

People who have reached this point in their thinking might say or write something like “I can’t go on” or “I just want to disappear” or “Everyone would be better off without me.” Mental health experts say statements like these should never be ignored. Recognizing the

Research reveals that 47 percent of people who had attempted suicide had shown signs of self-isolation before their suicide attempts.



potential significance of these phrases and responding with care and concern can potentially prevent a tragedy. If someone speaks about wanting to die, it should never be dismissed as just talk. It is a sign that you should immediately reach out to that person.

Fonda Bryant recalls the pain and hopelessness she once felt. In the 1990s she was living in North Carolina, attending school part time, working, and caring for her twelve-year-old son. And nothing seemed to be going right. She had no sense that life would improve for her or her son—and this pushed her into a deep depression. She stopped wearing makeup and doing her hair. She lost interest in going out with family and friends. All she really wanted to do was sleep, which meant she took a lot of naps.

Soon she began planning her suicide. During the planning, she called her aunt and told her she could have all her shoes. Bryant's aunt knew her well and knew that she loved her shoes. Her aunt acted immediately, asking Bryant if she was planning on taking her own life. Bryant admitted she was, and her aunt immediately called 911. Bryant was angry at the time but now gives her aunt credit for

saving her life. Now a certified suicide prevention instructor, Bryant shares her story to help others recognize the warning signs. “Suicide is everybody’s business,”³¹ Bryant explains.

Prevention Programs

Efforts to help young people learn and act on the signs are occurring in programs throughout the United States. Schools in many states have implemented programs to equip students with the skills and awareness needed to recognize and address signs of mental health challenges in their peers. These initiatives aim to combat the stigma of talking about mental health and prevent crises.

One such program is Hope Squad, a peer-to-peer suicide prevention initiative that trains students to identify signs of depression and suicidal thinking. In September 2024 the program was active in forty-seven US states and over two thousand schools.

Recognizing Suicide Warning Signs on Social Media

Posts on social media can reveal signs that a person is having suicidal thoughts. As clinical psychologist John Ackerman explains, “Most posts are harmless depictions of life in general; status updates, pictures of friends or food, or even a joke. However, sometimes, people discuss personal topics and show signs that things are not going well. Posts may contain words or images that reflect loneliness, isolation, hopelessness, irritability, or hostility.” Expressing hopelessness, feeling like a burden, and saying goodbye can all be signs that the person is in distress. Whether these statements appear in the person’s own words, lyrics from a poem or song, or even images, the thoughts expressed should be taken seriously. Other signs include sharing posts concerning death or self-harm, withdrawing from online interactions, and deleting accounts.

If you see a concerning post from someone you regularly interact with on social media, reach out to the person privately, express your concern, and encourage the person to talk to someone or get help. If the post feels serious, consider reporting it to the platform. Most social media platforms allow users to do this. A report will often trigger a direct message checking on the user. Taking action could make all the difference.

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This nonprofit organization, created by survivors of suicide loss for others who have had this experience, offers an online community forum for

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