

Suicide: Myths and Facts

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), someone around the globe commits suicide every 40 seconds. For people between the ages of 15 and 44, suicide is the fourth leading cause of death and the sixth leading cause of disability. According to Statistics Canada suicide rises to the second leading cause of death for 10-24 year-olds. Despite this reality many people, including parents, are often reluctant to talk about suicide. This is partly due to the stigma, guilt and shame that continue to surround the issue and also because of misconceptions about suicide prevention. Unfortunately, silence perpetuates harmful myths and attitudes and prevents people from getting the help they need. Communication is the first step in helping youth at risk of suicide. Learning the facts can build a parent's confidence in discussing this as well as other difficult subjects.

Myth: Talking about suicide will give a young person the idea, or permission, to consider suicide as a solution to their problems.

Fact: Giving a young person the opportunity to talk about suicide, and talking calmly without making judgments, can bring a sense of relief. A suicidal teen is typically feeling isolated and alone. A willingness to listen shows sincere concern, and encouraging them to talk about suicidal feelings can reduce the risk of an attempt.

Myth: Suicide is sudden and unpredictable.

Fact: 80% of suicide victims have given indications of their intentions. Indicators are plentiful and can include: sudden changes in behaviour (positive or negative), changes in eating or sleeping patterns, apathy, withdrawal from peers or social activities, preoccupation with death or dying, giving away valued personal possessions, expressions of hopelessness or worthlessness, recent attempts or death by suicide by a friend or family member, a drop in grades, troubles with peers, sudden disinterest in appearance, taking unnecessary risks, low self-esteem, lack of supports, as well as signs of depression. It is important to remember that suicide is a process, not an event.

Myth: Suicidal youth are only seeking attention or trying to manipulate others.

Fact: Efforts to manipulate or seek attention are a cause for concern. All suicide threats, gestures or comments must be taken seriously. "It's not worth it", "I can't handle it anymore", "no one cares", are examples of statements worth paying attention to.

Myth: Suicidal youth are determined to die.

Fact: As we all know, adolescence is a time of dramatic change. Young people often feel tremendous pressure to succeed at school, at home, and in their social relationships. At the same time they lack the life experience that can assure them that difficult situations do not last forever. Suicidal people are often ambivalent about dying. They don't necessarily want to die, but want their pain to end and see no other option. When coping mechanisms are overloaded or are complicated by depression, death can seem like the only way to make the pain stop.

Myth: A suicide attempt means that the young person will always have thoughts of suicide.

Fact: Everybody has at least theoretically thought about what it would be like to end their own life, and it is estimated that as many as one third of the general population has at some point in their lives seriously considered suicide. Most decide to live because they come to realize that the crisis is temporary. Even people who have attempted suicide go on to lead healthy and productive lives.

Myth: Winter has the highest suicide rate of all seasons.

Fact: Studies have shown that across North America suicide rates are actually lower during the winter season, including Christmas. July and August have the highest suicide rate out of all the months of the year, and a number of studies indicate that an especially high-risk time for vulnerable teens is when they return to school in the fall.

Being aware of these commonly held myths and misconceptions can help prevent a tragedy. As a parent, consider warning signs as invitation to communicate.

- Ask your child if they are contemplating suicide and try your hardest not to be judgmental or angry.
- Avoid expressing horror and fear or communicating your personal thoughts about suicide. It is much more effective to express a willingness to listen, no matter what the issues may be.
- Be non-judgmental. Don't debate whether suicide is right or wrong, or their feelings are good or bad.
- Don't be sworn to secrecy. You may need to involve others.
- Offer hope that there are other options, but do not offer glib reassurance.
- Get involved. Become available, and show interest and support.
- Take action. Get friends and family involved, and seek the assistance of a trained professional as soon as possible.