

Adolescent Suicide

Suicide among young people in the United States has increased dramatically in recent decades and is the second leading cause of death in college students, the third leading cause of death for 15- to 24-year-olds, and the sixth leading cause of death for 5- to 14-year-olds. Since 1950, the suicide rate for white males aged 15 to 24 has tripled, while for white females it has more than doubled. From 1980 to 1996, the suicide rate for African American males also has doubled. The December 26, 2001, issue of *JAMA* contains articles about adolescent suicide.



WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE KILL THEMSELVES?

Many factors can trigger suicide in young people, including

- Depression
- Abuse of alcohol or other drugs
- Family problems such as divorce, family violence, and family instability
- Stressful life events such as breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend, or death or other loss of a significant person
- Issues about sexual orientation

A family history of suicide or previous suicide attempts are risk factors for suicide.

SIGNS A PERSON MAY BE SUICIDAL

- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Withdrawal from friends and family and disinterest in normal or previously enjoyable activities
- Drug and alcohol use
- Feelings of hopelessness, guilt, boredom, and restlessness; difficulty concentrating, decline in quality of schoolwork
- Complaints about physical ailments such as stomach aches, headaches, or tiredness
- Giving away favorite possessions

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

Many young people with suicidal thoughts have a treatable psychiatric disorder such as depression or substance abuse.

- If a friend or loved one talks about suicide or shows signs of being suicidal, take it seriously. Listen and allow the person to express his or her feelings. Talk calmly about such feelings; do not lecture about reasons to live. Reassure the person that people care and want to help.
- Getting treatment is very important. Encourage the person to get help immediately from a specialist in mental health care and, if necessary, accompany him or her.
- Be sure there are no lethal weapons or potentially lethal medications in the person's home.

Sources: American Academy of Pediatrics, American Association of Suicidology, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Mayo Clinic, National Institute of Mental Health, National Mental Health Association, National Strategy for Suicide Prevention, Suicide Prevention Advocacy Network, US Department of Health and Human Services

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- *The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent Suicide*
US Department of Health and Human Services
www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/calltoaction
- Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
202/966-7300
800/333-7636 (for a physician referral)
www.aacap.org
- American Psychiatric Association
888/357-7924
www.psych.org
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
888/333-2377
www.afsp.org

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