

Warning Signs for Suicidal Behaviour

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Warning signs for suicidal behaviour are changes in a person's behaviours, feelings, and beliefs about them self that are out of character for that person and that may indicate increased risk. It is possible that a young person may become suicidal without exhibiting these signs or behaviours, but these can act as a warning sign. For some young people, suicidal behaviour may occur impulsively, especially if they are using alcohol or other drugs. Young people can also mask their distress or suicidal thinking with reckless, impulsive or aggressive behaviour.

Common warning signs for suicidal behaviour include recent or sudden changes in the following areas:

Changes in behaviour

- Isolation or withdrawal from other people (could include unexpectedly breaking up with their girlfriend or boyfriend).
- Loss of interest in previous liked activities.
- Unexpected deterioration in performance at school, work or sport.
- Significant changes in attendance patterns (e.g., not attending school).
- Crying a lot or suddenly seeming more angry.
- New involvement in high risk activities (e.g., drinking, shop-lifting, crossing the road recklessly or driving recklessly).
- Putting affairs in order (such as saying goodbye to loved ones).
- Giving away personal effects or prized possessions.

Changes in mood

Feelings of sadness, hopelessness, anxiety, desperation, anger, irritability, moodiness, aggressiveness, marked emotional instability (rapidly changing emotions), or feeling empty.

Changes in thinking

- Poor concentration.
- Inability or difficulties make decisions.
- Low self-esteem or self-worth.
- Inappropriate feelings of guilt.

Physical changes

- Loss of weight or weight gain.
- Loss of appetite or increase in appetite.
- Loss of energy or increased feelings of agitation.
- Changes in sleep patterns: particularly difficulty sleeping or oversleeping.
- Chronic physical complaints (e.g., headaches, stomach aches, fatigue).

Preoccupation with death

- Preoccupation with artwork, reading or writing about death.
- Preoccupation with thinking about someone who has died.

Talk of suicide

- Making statements like “I would be better off dead”, “What’s the point in living?”.
- Making threats of wanting to end it all or talking about suicide.
- Discussing, researching or asking about methods of suicide.
- Making plans for suicide.

Stress, loss

- Perceived loss or stress.
- Recent death or suicide amongst whānau, friends or peers.
- Recent whānau break-up or conflict.
- Recent relationship break-up.

Apparent resolution

If a young person suddenly appears happy or calm after a period of some of the warning signs listed above, it could be a sign that they have begun to make a plan to suicide. It is important to keep assessing/monitoring them for an extended period to be able to accurately assess and manage their risk.

What to do

If you are worried that a young person is showing some of these warning signs, here are some ways to help them:

- Be direct. Talk openly and matter-of-factly about suicide.
- Be willing to listen. Allow expressions of feelings and accept feelings.
- Be non-judgemental. Don’t debate whether suicide is right or wrong, or feelings are good or bad. Don’t lecture on the value of life.
- Get involved, be available, show interest and support.
- Don’t dare the person to go ahead.
- Don’t act shocked. This will put distance between you and they may not feel that they can tell you again in the future or the details of what they are thinking.
- Don’t be sworn to secrecy. Seek support and help for both the young person and for yourself. Supporting someone with suicidal behaviours can be hard and it is important to use the resources and the help around you.
- Offer hope that alternatives are available but do not offer glib reassurance.
- Take action. Remove means, such as guns/ropes/hoses/pills.
- Get help from persons or agencies specialising in mental health, including psychiatric emergency services.
- Don't give up your own hope - intervention by you can significantly decrease suicide risk.

References

Question, Persuade, Refer. *Level I Training: QPR Suicide Screening*, www.qpr.org.nz.
Youth Suicide Prevention Gatekeeper Training.
Teen Suicide and Youth Suicide. Canterbury Suicide Project.