



**Chapter 2:
Healthy Minds**

Suicide

Awareness, Prevention and Support

Call 9-1-1 or your doctor
in emergency situations

Fraser Valley
Regional Crisis Line
1-877-820-1166

Kids Help Phone
1-800-668-6868

Centre for Suicide
Prevention 24 Hour
Hotline
1-800-SUICIDE
(784-2433)

Or (604) 852-9099

Youth in BC Live Chat:
www.youthinbc.com

Stop a Suicide, Today!
www.stopasuicide.org

Kidshealth &
TeensHealth
www.kidshealth.org



Did you know that 70% of people who commit suicide tell someone else in advance?

When Andrew was sixteen years old, his best friend Josh committed suicide. Josh's girlfriend had recently broken up with him, and Josh didn't seem to be taking it well. He'd recently started participating in risky behavior that worried Andrew, like driving recklessly and trying drugs. It was almost as if Josh didn't care what happened to him. Andrew felt guilty that he was not able to prevent Josh's suicide, and felt very alone, until he realized that other people from all over the country as well as the rest of the world have also had to deal with the painful ordeal of losing a friend to suicide. Andrew wishes he had known the warning signs of suicide so he would have known what to look for, and helped Josh before it was too late.

Heartbreaking stories like Andrew's raise an interesting question: Are suicides preventable, and if so, how? Why do people kill themselves? How can we tell the difference between a real suicide threat and a cry for attention? It's true that while the majority of people who are about to commit suicide do tell a friend, not everyone does.

Who is At-Risk?

We all experience times of confusion, doubt, pain, and frustration growing up – particularly during the teenage years. We all deal with these problems in different ways, and it's difficult to predict how different people will react to their troubles. Some teens choose to talk to a friend, some will see a therapist, and some might think suicide is the only way out.

There is a lot of pressure put on teens to succeed, to fit in, and to be good people. Teens who have a wide support network with lots of friends, extracurricular activities, supportive family members, etc. have several outlets to deal with their frustrations. For instance, if they feel rejected at school, they might feel accepted at a church youth group they attend in the evenings. Some teens, however, feel isolated and rejected from their peers. They might not have different groups of friends or activities to keep them busy, and might feel suicide is the only way to end their pain. Identity questions, including gender and sexual orientation are significant factors in many youth suicides. Coping with loss and fear of rejection are common themes when it comes to suicide.

"How do I tell the difference between a cry for attention and the real deal?"

The good news: You don't have to! While some teens may threaten suicide to get attention, you shouldn't be the one to have to determine whether or not they are serious, or how likely they are to follow through with it. All threats should be taken seriously and reported to someone you trust, whether you hear the threat straight from the source or through the rumor mill. No harm ever came from caring too much. It is a myth that a failed suicide was a cry for attention—there are many reasons why an attempt might not succeed and it does not mean the person was not trying to take his or her own life. Suicide is **not** about getting attention. Take every suicide threat seriously.



Why do some people kill themselves?

People who consider killing themselves believe that suicide is the only way to stop the overwhelming pain or sadness they have been experiencing. The sad thing is, their pain blinds them to alternative solutions that might help with their problem. It is not true that only “unreasonable” people consider taking their own lives – plenty of intelligent, reasonable people have pondered it at some point or another. People are especially vulnerable to suicide when they have high expectations of themselves that are impossible to achieve. They attribute a failure to their own shortcomings (saying “I failed because I’m an idiot” rather than “That was a tough test, I bet everyone struggled with it”). Making these failures personal by attributing them to internal inadequacies rather than external factors might lead some people to consider themselves worthless or unlovable.

How are Depression and Suicide Related?

Did you know?

20-40% of people who kill themselves have made a previous suicide attempt.

Clinical depression can be diagnosed when a person has lost interest in usual activities, has a persistently low mood, and has lost some of their ability to experience pleasure. It can become a serious problem when it interferes with their daily life and lasts for more than two weeks.

People can become depressed when they have a chemical imbalance in their brain, or have an unhealthy way of thinking about things. Some people with depression use alcohol or drugs in an attempt to numb their unpleasant feelings but this can increase their risk for suicide by impairing judgment and increasing impulsivity. When people become depressed, their thoughts become distorted. As they feel hopeless, helpless, and alone, and assume they will never be happy again, suicide can begin to seem like a viable option. **Depression can be treated** with cognitive therapy (to fix negative thinking), interpersonal therapy (to focus on how people interact with others), and/or by medication (to regulate a chemical imbalance in the brain). The majority of people with depression live healthy lives and **do not** attempt suicide, but education and awareness is important to make sure people going through tough situations know there are alternatives to suicide. Some people who feel suicidal might not even realize they are actually feeling depressed. **Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary situation.**

What Are Some Warning Signs That Someone I Know May be At-Risk For Depression Or Suicide?

They might exhibit one or more of the following:

PART ONE (SIGNS OF DEPRESSION):

- Pulls away from friends and family
- Feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness
- Experiences changes in eating or sleeping habits, mood swings, depressed feelings, etc.
- Self-destructive behavior (drinking, drug use, driving recklessly, etc.)
- Loss of interest and pleasure in activities they once enjoyed
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Has suffered physical or sexual abuse

PART TWO (SIGNS OF SUICIDE RISK):

- Gives away their possessions
- Has experienced a loss (eg. a break up)
- Makes statements like “You’d be better off without me or “You’ll be sorry when I’m gone”
- Writes a suicide note or obtains a weapon
- Has a psychological disorder like depression or bipolar disorder
- Has a history of poor coping strategies
- Has a family history of depression or suicide
- Has made a previous suicide attempt

Note: Part One are potential signs of **Depression** while Part Two are potential signs your friend might be at-risk for **Suicide**.

If your friend exhibits risks from both Part One and Part Two they might be at a very high risk for suicide. Either way, you should immediately tell someone you trust to get your friend the help they need. Remember: Not all people who are considering suicide will tell someone.

Never Promise To Keep A Secret When You Learn That Someone Is Planning to Hurt Themselves or Others! It Is Better To Risk A Friendship By Breaking A Confidence Than To Lose A Friend Forever To Suicide.



WHAT TO DO IF YOUR FRIEND TELLS YOU THEY ARE CONSIDERING SUICIDE:

- ◆ Acknowledge their problem and take it seriously. They trusted you enough to tell you their problem. Really listen.
- ◆ Tell your friend you care about them and are concerned. Explain that they are not alone in feeling this way, and their suicidal thoughts are treatable and will not last forever. Encourage them to see positive things in their life and in their future.
- ◆ Ask if your friend has a plan and/or the “means” to commit suicide. This might help you determine that the problem is indeed more serious than a passing comment. It is a myth that talking about suicide will lead a person to kill themselves. If anything, it will help them get their feelings out in the open and consider alternatives.
- ◆ Get professional help by talking to a teacher, parent, **Big Brother or Big Sister**, or calling for emergency help. If your friend is willing to seek help, take them to a doctor or a teacher to talk. If he or she is not willing to seek outside help, do it on your own.

REMEMBER to “ACT!” **Acknowledge** your friend’s distress, tell them you **Care**, and help them seek **Treatment**.

WHAT NOT TO DO:

- ◆ **Don’t** assume the problem will take care of itself or that the two of you can handle it yourselves without outside assistance.
- ◆ **Don’t** promise to keep it a secret.
- ◆ **Don’t** argue over moral issues (eg. “It is a sin to kill yourself.”)
- ◆ **Don’t** tell the person to snap out of it, tease them, or otherwise make light of the situation (eg. “Oh, you don’t really mean it”).
- ◆ **Don’t** put yourself in danger—if the situation seems risky, leave and call 911.

Remember that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.

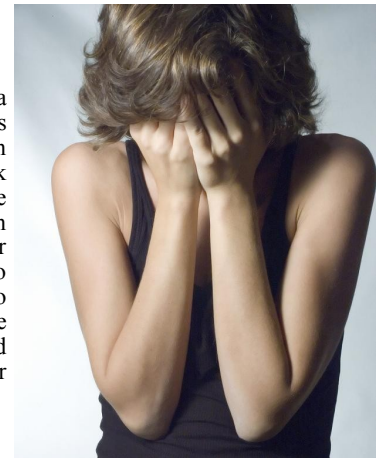
WHAT IF I HAVE LOST SOMEONE TO SUICIDE?

It is normal to feel angry when a loved one commits suicide. Suicide can sometimes feel like a very selfish act, and you might feel angry and rejected for being left behind or feel guilty you couldn’t prevent the act. Seek out supportive friends to talk to about your loss rather than isolating yourself. Support groups where you can meet other people who have lost loved ones to suicide might assist in your grieving process. Many schools will bring in grief counsellors to help students with the loss of a classmate. Don’t hesitate to seek out resources to help you deal with your loss, or ask for help. When someone attempts suicide and survives, their friends might avoid them or feel uncomfortable talking about it. This is unfortunate, as they are vulnerable and most likely want to get their feelings out and not feel so alone.

For more information on grief and loss refer to the article on “Grief”.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE & SUICIDE:

Things can get worse when a person turns to alcohol or drugs as an escape, since these can actually increase a person’s risk for suicide. Alcohol and some drugs have depressive effects on the brain and can also impair judgement and our ability to come up with solutions to problems. Teens who use substances such as alcohol and drugs are more at risk for suicidal thinking and behavior.



Not everyone who attempts suicide wants to die. Sometimes an attempt will happen impulsively during a time of great emotional upset and deep pain (eg. after a fight) or while impaired.

“WON’T MY FRIEND HATE ME IF I TELL THEIR SECRET TO AN ADULT AFTER I PROMISED I WOULDN’T?”

If your friend made the tough decision to tell you they have been considering suicide, chances are they are hoping (maybe deep down inside) that you will talk them out of it or find someone who can. If they wanted to keep it a secret, they would have. Saying “I want to kill myself” might be their way of saying “I am really hurt and confused, what are my alternatives?” You are not a mental health professional, and while you can be a great sounding board for your friend to vent their sadness to, you owe it to your friend to get them professional help to deal with their problem. It’s called being a good friend. Even if you aren’t positive your friend is considering suicide, it’s okay to speak up if you think they are depressed or putting their personal safety at risk. Wouldn’t you rather speak up and find out they aren’t in danger than risk not speaking up when they are in real danger?

Remember: It is better to risk a friendship by breaking a confidence than to lose a friend forever to suicide.

There are people who care about you and want you around.



Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Fraser Valley

HOW BIG BROTHERS AND SISTERS CAN HELP THEIR LITTLE WITH ISSUES RELATED TO SUICIDE

- ⇒ **If your Little expresses concern that a friend of theirs might be considering suicide**, encourage them to tell a teacher or school counsellor (or a trusted family friend or relative). Tell your Mentoring Coordinator about the disclosure immediately. Allow your Little to discuss his or her concerns and really listen.
- ⇒ **If your Little approaches you to disclose their own suicidal thoughts**, follow the “ACT” rule: **A**cknowledge their feelings, tell them you **C**are and express concern, then seek **T**reatment. Advise your Mentoring Coordinator immediately.
- ⇒ **If your Little has lost a loved one to suicide**, talk to your Mentoring Coordinator about finding them a support group or a counselor to talk to about their feelings. Expect your Little to move through the stages of grief, and to want to talk to you about their loss. For more information on grief and loss, see the article on **Grief**.

WHAT CAN COMMUNITIES DO?

It is valuable to increase public awareness about suicide so people know the warning signs to look for. It is important that every community and school have both a suicide prevention and postvention program to help those who have been impacted by suicide and/or those who may consider it. A school curriculum which includes discussions on positive mental, emotional and spiritual health, the dangers of substance abuse, the warning signs of suicide, etc. can be enhanced by community workshops offering life skills, problem-solving and communication skills counselling to youth and their caregivers. Other examples of beneficial programs might include high school peer counselling (to enhance listening skills and support networks) and recreational/athletic programs (to combat boredom and promote teamwork and a sense of belonging). Quick community response following a suicide is also important to avoid the phenomenon known as suicide contagion (or suicide clusters) where, following a suicide in the community, a higher than average amount of suicides occur in a shorter period of time than would normally be expected. It is important for community leaders to include the media in response/prevention planning. It's good to develop a strategy to avoid over reporting the tragedy, while perhaps increasing Public Service Announcements on the warning signs that indicate a person is at risk for suicide and where these people can turn to for help. Teenagers especially need to be provided with an outlet to receive evaluation, counselling and support after the death of a friend or family member. If you know someone who committed suicide or if you have been feeling depressed, make sure you talk to a guidance counsellor, friend, parent, or your **Big Brother/Big Sister** about your feelings. Suicide is not “contagious”, but if it is over-reported and glorified, others might feel tempted to do it as well if it seems like an easy way out. Remember that a suicide leaves behind grieving friends, family members, and communities and is far from an easy way to solve your problems.

**Thank you to the following members of our Panel for
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Dr Robert Lees, PhD, Rosalyn Francis, B.Ed., MA
Cecilia Codoceo, RSW & Kim Stuckless, Ed Psych.

Resources

Available from the Fraser Valley Regional Library

For TEENS (13-17)

- *Coping with Teen Suicide*. James M. Murphy. New York: Rosen, 1999.
- *The Power to Prevent Suicide: A Guide for Teens Helping Teens*. Richard E. Nelson and Judith C. Galas. MN: Free Spirit Pub, 1994.
- *Suicide: Teens Talk to Teens*. Marion Crook. North Vancouver: Self-Counsel Press, 1997.
- *Aimee: A Novel*. Mary Beth Miller. New York: Dutton Books, 2002.
- *SOS: A Handbook for Survivors of Suicide*. (For anyone who has lost a loved one to suicide) Jeffrey Jackson. American Association of Suicidology.**

**available to download online:

<http://www.stopasuicide.org/Survivor.aspx>

For BIG BROTHERS/BIG SISTERS & PARENTS

After a Parent's Suicide: Helping Children Heal. Margo Requarth. CA: Healing Heart Press, 2006.



WHAT IS ASSISTED SUICIDE?

Assisted suicide means helping someone else take their own life. In most Western countries, helping your friend or family member commit suicide is illegal, not to mention it will leave you with feelings of confusion and guilt for the rest of your life. When we hear about assisted suicide in the news, it usually refers to a person who is terminally ill or in a great deal of physical pain, and wishes for a doctor to relieve their misery, kind of like putting a pet to sleep when it is in a lot of pain. *Euthanasia* refers to the practice of medically-assisted death and it is illegal in most countries. It is important to recognize that the discussions about assisted suicide in the news are more about people who wish to relieve physical pain and disability and less about people who are feeling depressed or in emotional pain. There are other alternatives for people dealing with emotional pain or depression, such as therapy and/or medication. Helping a friend commit suicide is a crime in North America. If a friend has asked you to help them commit suicide it is important to discuss the issue with an adult you trust, like a **Big Brother** or **Big Sister**. They can help find resources to get your friend the help he or she needs.