

Recognizing Warning Signs of Suicide

While it can be hard to discuss, suicide and suicidal ideation have been becoming increasingly common in youth in the past few years. According to the PEW Research Center, greater than one in five students had strongly considered suicide. This is a drastic increase when compared to 2011, when only 11% of students had considered suicide. This increase is also reflected in the number of children who have made plans or attempted to take their own life, which sat at 13% and 8% respectively last year. These rates are higher in disadvantaged groups, such as POC, LGBTQ+, and those with pre-existing mental health conditions. With this many students showing these behaviors, keeping vigilant and keeping an eye out for the warning signs is more important than ever.

The red flags before suicide can be very subtle. Particularly during teenage years, these can be misattributed to “teenage angst” or moodiness. Despite these other possibilities, it’s always important to treat these behaviors seriously to be safe. Per Johns Hopkins, some of the warning signs of suicide are:

- Changes in eating and sleeping behaviors
- Loss of interest in hobbies and activities
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Unnecessary risk taking
- Obsession with death or dying
- Inability to focus on schoolwork
- Neglecting hygiene
- Perpetual Boredom
- Apathy or no responses to praise
- Engaging in self-harming behaviors (cutting, bruising, etc.)

While these may be signs of someone contemplating suicide, there are additional indicators that a suicide attempt is being planned. Some are very obvious, such as saying “I’m going to kill myself” in passing, or writing goodbye letters and suicide notes. On the other hand, some are much more subtle. Verbal hints can be a sign, such as saying something like, “you won’t have to worry about me for much longer”, or making plans if anything were to happen to them. Before a suicide attempt, some people may give away prized possessions to their friends and loved ones. Finally, and most subtly, some people become much more cheerful after a stretch of depression or apathy. Often people attribute this to the person’s mental health improving, however, it can be a sign that they’re feeling relief after making plans to take their life.

If you recognize these behaviors in your child or student, it’s important to take action immediately. Reach out to their teachers, counselors, parents, and friends to ask what they’ve seen. Most importantly, speak openly and directly with your student or child. Do not mince words or avoid the subject. Plainly asking the question “Are you considering killing yourself” is important, because it removes any ambiguity from the conversation. When speaking to them, avoid casting judgment or giving too strong of reactions to what they say. At this point, our only job is to support the student. While what they say may alarm or hurt us, maintaining composure and making them feel heard is vital to suicide prevention. Finally, if you’re concerned for your child’s mental health, please reach out to their family doctor or mental health provider.

If you’re interested in learning more about suicide prevention, QPR Training can be an excellent resource. Please feel free to reach out to the SCIP office at 402-327-6843, or email at dtucker@lmep.com, for assistance in becoming QPR trained. As well, visit the SCIP website at <https://scipnebraska.com> for more digital resources on suicide prevention.

References

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/teen-suicide>

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<https://www.nm.org/healthbeat/healthy-tips/emotional-health/the-suicide-epidemic>

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