

Facts about Suicide in Adolescents

Suicide is complicated and involves the interplay of multiple risk factors. It is not simply the result of stress or difficult life circumstances. Many people who die by suicide have a mental health condition. In teens, the behavioral health conditions most closely linked to suicide risk are major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, conduct disorder, eating disorders, and substance abuse problems. Although in some cases these conditions may be precipitated by environmental stressors, they can also occur as a result of changes in brain chemistry, even in the absence of an identifiable or obvious “trigger.”

Other key risk factors for suicide include the following:

- Personality characteristics, such as hopelessness, low self-esteem, impulsivity, risk-taking, and poor problem-solving or coping skills
- Family characteristics, such as family history of suicidal behavior or mental health problems, death of a close family member, and problems in the parent-child relationship
- Childhood abuse, neglect, or trauma
- Stressful life circumstances, such as physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse; breaking up of a romantic relationship; school problems; bullying by peers; trouble with the law; and suicide of a peer
- Access to lethal means, especially in the home

It is important to remember that the vast majority of teens who experience even very stressful life events do not become suicidal. But in some cases, such experiences can be a catalyst for suicidal behavior in teens who are already struggling with depression or other mental health problems. In others, traumatic experiences (such as prolonged bullying) can precipitate depression, anxiety, abuse of alcohol or drugs, or another mental health condition, which can increase suicide risk. Conversely, existing mental health conditions may also lead to stressful life experiences, which may then exacerbate the underlying illness and in turn increase suicide risk.

Help Is Available

If there are concerns about a student’s emotional or mental health, a referral should be made to an appropriate mental health professional for assessment, diagnosis, and possible treatment. Mental health resources that may be available include the following:

- School-based mental health professionals
- Community mental health providers and clinics
- Emergency psychiatric screening centers
- Children’s mobile response programs

Pediatricians and primary care providers can also be a source of mental health referrals. Many of them are also well-versed in recognizing and treating certain mental health conditions like depression.

Information and referrals regarding treatment for mental and substance use disorders are available at SAMHSA’s National Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357). This is a free, confidential service open 24/7.