



# WARNING SIGNS OF SUICIDE IN MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL

## *What To Look Out For In Your Child*

Warning signs for suicide are the clues that your child is in real distress and may be at risk for suicide in the immediate future. If you look online, you can find a variety of websites that provide lists of behaviors or feelings that should raise your concerns, and while they all include helpful information, they often leave parents feeling confused, because a lot of what is listed describes almost every adolescent. So, here's some information designed specifically for you as parents. However, you need to view this information through your parental lens, for your particular child, to make it useful.

First of all, the most important fact to consider is whether you are noticing **CHANGES** in your child that reflect a difference in the way they acted, looked or talked as little as two weeks ago. Have their peers identified changes, or their school? It's not foolproof but it will be a useful perspective as we review the following list. The simplest way to organize common warning signs is by using the acronym **FACTS**. Let's go through each letter and identify examples.

**F stands for FEELINGS.** You may hear things that indicate your child has **lost hope** for the future ['I don't care if I graduate, it doesn't matter anymore'] or is **angry** at the whole world ['I hate everyone']. **Worthlessness** can also emerge ['I'm no good at anything']. **Worry or anxiety** may become their constant companions. Something that is called 'flat affect'- a monotone, lifeless mood may signal **depression**. All of these feelings seem to reflect a degree of **helplessness** at not being able to do anything to make life feel better.

**A stands for ACTIONS,** behaviors you can see. Most commonly reported are engaging in increasingly risky or dangerous behaviors, getting into fights or arguments, withdrawing from friends or activities they used to enjoy, or not being able to sleep or sleeping all the time. Having nightmares has also been identified in some studies as a worrisome behavior change. Looking online for ways to die has emerged in the last few years and is one of the reasons some schools are implementing technology monitoring software. Being involved in bullying- as the person doing the bullying, the person being bullied, or simply as a bystander is also concerning, especially if the degree of bullying seems to be escalating.



**C stands for CHANGES** that are apparent from the way your child seemed as little as two weeks ago. These can be in behavior, appearance, mood, or interests. As you can see the category of 'changes' is pervasive, although it may be the easiest for you as a parent to notice. It may overlap with the other categories, for example, you notice a change related to how your child is acting or feeling. Identify how your child seems different; is it something specific or something you can't put your finger on but just sense? Certainly adolescence is normally a time of ups and downs which is why using that two-week window of time can be helpful.

**T stands for THREATS or TALK.** Sometimes it's direct ["I'm going to kill myself"] but more often it is a vague comment that reflects those hopeless, worthless, or helpless feelings we identified in the category "F". "I wish I were dead" or "I hate my life" may fall into this category, which is why you need to respond to any negative or morbid talk with a request to 'tell me more'. Maybe it's a passing feeling but this can be an exception to that two-week rule. Anytime you hear something that suggests your child is fed up with life, even once, as a parent, you want to know more about it.

**S stands for SITUATIONS** that may serve as triggers for the suicidal thoughts or feelings. Again, while it would be hard to list all the possibilities, these usually fit into categories that have to do with some kind of loss or change for which your child feels unprepared. Getting into trouble at home, in school or with the law can also be triggering situations. The suicide usually takes place in the time between when the event happens and when there is some resolution of it- that time of uncertainty when one can imagine the worst. A type of situation that may seem surprising is being exposed to the death that happens, under any circumstances, of a peer or a role model. Especially for older teens and young adults, it can trigger thoughts of their own mortality ["if she could die, so could I"] which are thoughts that can interfere with their developmental task of figuring out how they want to invest energy in their lives.

The fine points to remember about warning signs:

- Usually you will see more than one but pay attention even if there's only one you can identify. Ask about what you notice: ' gee, you don't seem like yourself lately- what's going on?'
- It can be very helpful to add: "you know, I've heard that sometimes when kids feel the way you do, they think life isn't worth living. I wonder if you ever have those thoughts?"
- Remember, you're not going to plant the idea; you're simply giving your child permission to share what may be scary feelings. It's a hard question to ask but it is **ESSENTIAL** to letting your child know they can always confide those feelings in you, even if they don't have them right now.
- Some vulnerable youth (e.g., with a history of drug/substance use treatment; previous suicide attempts; family history of suicide; previous mental health diagnosis) may experience one of those triggering situations and make a suicide attempt without some of the other warning signs. This is why it's important to get comfortable asking youth who may fall into any of these categories questions about how safe they feel with themselves (many families use a 1-5 scale) as a way to **ALWAYS** leave the door open to their sharing thoughts or feelings about suicide.