

FAMILY MENTAL HEALTH

Lessons & Activities

Understanding Warning Signs and Risk Factors

“Most people who take their lives exhibit one or more warning signs, either through what they say or what they do.”—American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

🎯 Purpose: This lesson will teach family members about risk factors and how to recognize and react to suicide warning signs.

👤 Parent Pre-reading

Suicide is a complex situation and has no single cause. Some people feel severe depression and feel like a burden to others, so they look to suicide as a way to escape. Some people use a suicide attempt as a cry for help with something they're going through that they feel like they can't handle. Regardless of the situation, there are ways to help prevent suicide.

A main part of suicide prevention is recognizing when someone is considering suicide and knowing what to do about it. The majority of individuals who attempt or are lost to suicide give warning signs beforehand. Warning signs are like red flags that someone is in immediate danger of suicide, such as if someone is talking about wanting to die or hurt themselves, is actively looking for lethal means of suicide, or is having extreme mood swings. When people exhibit these and other warning signs, they need immediate help. This is the reason knowledge is key to suicide prevention; the more people who know how to recognize warning signs and know where to turn for help, the better chance struggling individuals have of getting the help they need.

Individuals who attempt or are lost to suicide may have one or more risk factor for suicide. Risk factors are behaviors or aspects of life that tend to make a person more at risk for suicide, such as previous suicide attempts, mental illness, or a family history of suicide. These may or may not be direct causes of suicide. It's important to understand that just by having one of the risk factors does not mean that person will attempt suicide. Understanding the risk factors gives us an idea of what to watch out for to better prevent suicide.

📄 Preparation

Print off a copy of the activity page (at the end of the lesson) and cut the scenarios into strips, so each is on its own piece of paper. Fold each strip in half and put into a bowl.

Preview the video that goes along with this lesson.

Optional: Have a copy of *The Cloud* by Hannah Cumming available to read with your family.

Lesson

Warning signs are changes in how people usually act, what they feel, or what they say that could indicate they are thinking about suicide. Some of the warning signs of suicide include the following:

Actions:

- Sleeping more or less than usual
- Withdrawing and not doing activities previously enjoyed
- Having extreme mood swings
- Giving away prized possessions
- Using alcohol and drugs more
- Looking for a way to self-harm or attempt suicide

Feelings:

- Feeling hopeless
- Feeling like a burden to others

Words:

- Talking about wanting to die
- Saying that people would be better off without them
- Saying goodbye to people by calling or visiting them

If one or more warning sign is shown, that person could be in immediate danger of a suicide attempt. Most people who attempt or are lost to suicide give at least one warning sign beforehand. This is why it is so important to learn the warning signs of suicide. Just by knowing what to watch for and knowing how to respond, suicide can be prevented.

If you notice any of these warning signs, take the following actions:

- Ask the person if he or she is ok and listen to what is said.
- Tell the person you are worried about him or her because of what has been said or done.
- Let him or her know that there is help available and offer to help find that help.
- Tell a parent or other trustworthy adult what you have observed.

Unlike warning signs, which indicate an immediate risk, risk factors do not predict suicide. Instead, risk factors are characteristics people could have that make it more likely they will attempt suicide. Risk factors might not be a direct cause of a suicide attempt, but understanding what they are is important to preventing suicide. The risk factors of suicide include the following:

- Having a family history of suicide
- Experiencing a loss (a person, pet, job, etc.)
- Having a history of trauma or abuse
- Frequently abusing alcohol or drugs
- Attempting suicide in the past

Remember, if you notice any warning signs, take action! The more people who know about warning signs and how to react, the more lives that can be saved.

Adapting for Younger Children

Summarize the lesson in a few simple sentences that your child can understand. Talk about ways your child can help someone who may be having a hard time (examples include being a good friend, listening, asking if the person is ok). Even young children can recognize when something might be off. Encourage them to talk to you, the parents, if they think someone might need help.

To help your child better understand the lesson, you could read *The Cloud* by Hannah Cumming. The story is about a girl who is feeling sad at school, represented by a black cloud, and how a classmate notices and tries to help. Some questions you could ask and points you could go over after reading the story include the following:

- What were some things that happened in the story that told you someone in the story was in trouble? (For example, feeling left out, not coming to school, or being depressed.)
- What did the cloud symbolize?
- People who are in trouble will not have dark clouds above them, so what are some other signs we can look for in people who may be in trouble?

Activity

Choose someone to pull a slip of paper out of the bowl. Read the situation aloud, and discuss as a family how you could respond in that situation. Take turns choosing slips of paper until they have all been picked.

Video

This video reviews the different warning signs of suicide. However, it is important to explain to your children that while the clip uses the phrase “commit suicide,” a more appropriate usage is “die by suicide” or “take their life.”

<https://youtu.be/soQoEkuUc9s>

What Can I Do to Help?

Your best friend seems to be having a rough week. You overhear him telling someone else that he feels like a burden to his family. At the end of the week, he gives you his baseball glove, his most prized possession. When you ask why he's giving it to you, he responds, "I won't be needing it anymore."

After dance class, you find a dancer in the locker room, crying. Her mom, who used to come to all the dance recitals, passed away a month ago, and the daughter is having a hard time with it. You notice there seem to be cuts on her arms. She hurries and pulls on a jacket when she notices you looking.

In your math class, there is one student who always knows the answer to the teacher's question and gets perfect scores on all the tests. Besides knowing she is the best student in class, you don't know that much about her. One day, though, you notice she looks really tired and that her usually perfect hair is in a messy knot on top of her head. She stops raising her hand to answer questions in class and even failed the last test.

After football practice, you find one of your teammates under the bleachers. He had missed practice all week, and you know how much he loves playing football. However, now, under the bleachers, he was drinking alcohol. You know he's had problems with alcohol in the past. When you ask what's going on, he says that his girlfriend just broke up with him and he doesn't know how he'll go on. He says, "She'll be sorry when I'm gone."

You're in a bathroom stall at school and someone walks in talking on the phone. One of the things she says is, "I'm so sick of feeling this way. I just want to die." You don't know who this girl is, but the things she is saying makes you feel uncomfortable and scared.

References

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, “Risk Factors and Warning Signs.” Retrieved from <https://afsp.org/about-suicide/risk-factors-and-warning-signs/>.

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Suicide Awareness Voices of Education, “Warning Signs of Suicide.” Retrieved from <https://save.org/about-suicide/warning-signs-risk-factors-protective-factors/>.

“Suicide Prevention: How to Help Someone Who Is Suicidal and Save a Life.” *HelpGuide.org*. Retrieved from <https://helpguide.org/articles/suicide-prevention/suicide-prevention.htm>.

“Youth Suicide Warning Signs.” *Youth Suicide Warning Signs*. Retrieved from <https://www.youthsuicidewarningsigns.org/healthcare-professionals>. (The information provided on the website comes from a collaboration of expert panelists in Rockville, Maryland, in 2014, held by leaders from the American Association of Suicideology, the National Center for Prevention of Youth Suicide, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. A complete list of all the panelists who participated can be found at [youthsuicidewarningsigns.org/about](https://www.youthsuicidewarningsigns.org/about).)

Additional Resources

The following are just a few of the websites, numbers, and apps that provide convenient information about suicide prevention. Click on the icon to find out more about the resource.

