# Preventing Suicide and Supporting Those Affected

**Suicide is one of the leading preventable causes of death.** Yet too many people who are at risk of suicide do not seek help. We need to find better ways to reach out to those who suffer and encourage schools, workplaces, and communities to make mental health a priority.[i]

## Key Facts[ii]

- More than 44,000 Americans die by suicide each year (about 121 per day).
- Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S. and the second leading cause of death for teenagers, ages 15-19 (higher than homicide).
- For every suicide, there are 25 attempts.
- Men die by suicide 3.5 times more often than women, with white males accounting for 7 of 10 suicides in 2015.
- Suicide rates are highest among adults aged 45 to 64 years, and those 85 years and older.
- There is no single cause of suicide, but suicide most often occurs when stressors exceed coping abilities of someone suffering from a mental health condition.
- With help, most people who survive a suicide attempt go on to live healthy, productive lives.

## Possible Questions for Discussion

- How have you been affected by suicide?
- How can we reduce the stigma of mental illness and suicide?
- Do the facts about suicide surprise you?

## How You Can Prevent Suicide and Help Those Affected

*Know the Warning Signs and Risk Factors*[iii]

- Look for a change in behavior, especially if it is related to a painful event, loss, or change.
- A person talks about being a burden, feeling trapped, experiencing unbearable pain, or having no reason to live.
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs, acting recklessly, withdrawing from activities, isolating from family and friends, increased aggression, sleeping too much or too little, saying goodbye to friends or loved ones, or giving away prized possessions.
- Display of one or more of the following moods: depression, loss of interest, rage, irritability, humiliation, or anxiety.
- Risk factors such as underlying mental health conditions like depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia, substance use disorders, or other serious or chronic health conditions and/or pain.
- Stressful life events such as death of a friend or loved one, divorce, or job loss.
- Access to lethal means, particularly firearms.
- Exposure to another person's suicide or to graphic/sensationalized accounts of suicide.
- Previous suicide attempts or a family history of suicide attempts.

*Take Action if You Think Someone Has Suicidal Thoughts*[iv]

- Don't assume the person will reach out for help; only 1 in 5 people do.
- Ask if you can talk in private, then ask questions to open up the conversation such as "How are you doing?" or "You haven't seemed yourself lately. Is everything okay?"
- Listen to their story and express concern and caring.
- Ask if they are having thoughts of ending their life; discussing suicidal thoughts does not make someone more likely to attempt suicide.
- Encourage the person to seek mental health services. Tell them seeking help can take courage but it's the smart thing to do.
- If they are considering suicide: Take the person seriously; tell them to call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 (TALK); help them remove lethal means; and escort them to an ER, counseling service, or psychiatrist.

*Support Survivors of Suicide*

- Too often, friends do not know what to say or how to offer support to survivors of suicide.
- Survivors of suicide frequently do not benefit from the same level of compassion and support as do other survivors.
- Offer compassionate support[v]:
    - Educate yourself about suicide and actively listen without judgment.
    - Ask if and how you can help, letting survivors grieve at their own pace and in own way.
    - Use the loved one's name to humanize the decedent.
    - It's okay if you do not know what to say; your presence and listening is most important.
    - Avoid statements such as "I know how you feel" (unless you are also a survivor).
    - Avoid harmful phrases like "commit suicide" or "succeeded" after a previous attempt.

## About The Kennedy Forum

Just as President Kennedy rallied the nation to dream big and set audacious goals 50 years ago, The Kennedy Forum in Illinois is working toward lasting change in the way mental health and addictions are considered and treated. Our mission is to end stigma against mental health and substance use disorders in both attitudes and practice. We believe that strong, bold leadership, strategic collaboration with partners and concerted action, it is possible to build a future with a health system that fully recognizes that the brain is part of the body and all persons are treated with dignity. Join us at www.thekennedyforumillinois.org .

## REFERENCES


American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: https://afsp.org/

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Illinois: https://afsp.org/chapter/afsp-illinois/

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255 (TALK), https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/

National Institute of Mental Health: https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/suicide-prevention/index.shtml

U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Discussion Guide: https://www.samhsa.gov/community-conversations


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[i] With permission, materials on this fact sheet are drawn heavily from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's website, available at https://afsp.org.

[ii] American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Suicide Statistics, https://afsp.org/about-suicide/suicide-statistics/.

[iii] American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Risk Factors and Warning Signs, https://afsp.org/about-suicide/risk-factors-and-warning-signs/.

[iv] American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, When Someone is at Risk, https://afsp.org/find-support/when-someone-is-at-risk/.

[v] American Association of Suicidology, *Helping Survivors of Suicide: What Can You Do?* August 20, 2004, https://www.ipfw.edu/dotAsset/66406216-4f74-4f51-aa8a-dc406a50d9a1.pdf.