

Handout: Understanding Suicide

Suicide Warning Signs: There are several “red flags” that you want to pay special attention to if a person is talking about suicide. One warning sign does NOT mean that the person is definitely going to harm him/herself; rather, these cues may prompt you to explore the issue further:

1. Changes in the level of depression (more depressed or happier than usual), especially if he/she:
 - a. Has a specific plan for how to kill him/herself
 - b. Begins to get his/her affairs in order (e.g., writes a will, gives things away, systematically contacts old friends or relatives)
 - c. Feels worthless
 - d. Talks about having done an unforgivable behavior
 - e. Feels hopeless about the future
 - f. Hears voices saying to harm him/herself
2. Talks about being indestructible or having supernatural powers during a manic or delusional state
3. Talks about killing him/herself (“Everyone would be better off without me”)
4. Makes suicidal gestures (takes too many pills, cuts wrists, etc.)
5. Increases use of alcohol or other drugs.
6. Has previously attempted suicide OR has a history of being impulsive

What to do if your family member or friend is suicidal

1. Talk about it! Asking about suicide will not put ideas in his/her head and will not make the situation worse. Ask – then listen. You may want to discuss coping strategies at a time when the person is not actively suicidal.
2. Offer emotional support by expressing your concern, care, and willingness to help.
3. Ask if he/she has a plan about how to kill him/herself. If so, then:
 - a. Seek professional help immediately.
 - b. Try to get the person to promise that he/she will not act on these plans without first talking to you, a hotline, or mental health professional.
 - c. Put away any objects that your family member may use to harm him/herself (guns, knives, pills, razors, etc.).
4. If the person is delusional, seek professional help.
5. If you don’t know what to do, call a professional (e.g., suicide hotline, mental health professional, police)