

SUICIDE FAQs

by Dionne Guischard

In my first year at university, a guy I knew committed suicide. I remember feeling confused as to why he had done the deed because he had always seemed to be such a cheerful person, always surrounded by a group of friends.

This was not my first experience with suicide as one of my classmates had attempted to kill herself on two occasions when we were both in Form Four. At the time, I disregarded her attempts as a pathetic bid for attention but nearly ten years later and two more attempts on her part, I am a bit wiser about her motives.

Why do young persons commit suicide?

Although depression is a common phenomenon among young persons, research has shown that the majority of teenagers and young adults who commit suicide are severely depressed. Such persons find it hard to cope with normal stressors that are a natural part of growing up.

These stressors – which can be viewed as suicide ‘triggers’ - include major disappointment, rejection, failure, or loss such as failing a big exam, family turmoil or breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend.

When confronted with these ‘trigger’ events a severely depressed person, unable to cope normally, may choose a permanent solution – suicide – to what we may perceive to be a temporary problem.

What signs should we look for?

When that guy at university committed suicide I was totally confused. I did not understand how someone who always looked so cheerful every time I saw him could be depressed enough to kill himself.

I thought that with the number of ‘friends’ that he had, there would surely have been someone he could have spoken with if he was having problems that he felt he could not resolve. I even deduced that it could not be a problem with school because we had not as yet had mid terms.

When someone commits or attempts to commit suicide, it usually comes as a surprise to their loved ones. They will usually indicate that the individual never displayed any behavioural indicators that would point to suicide. Tragically, many symptoms go unrecognised.

Some of these signs include:

- Extreme personality change
- Loss of interest in activities that used to be enjoyable

- Significant appetite loss or gain
- Difficulty falling asleep or wanting to sleep all day
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Withdrawal from a family or friend
- Neglect of personal appearance or hygiene
- Sadness, irritability or indifference
- Drug or alcohol use or abuse
- Poor school behaviour

A person who suffers from one or more of these symptoms may not necessarily be suicidal, however it does indicate that something is wrong. Therefore if we observe that one of our peers is displaying one or more of these signs, we should try to help before they opt for a permanent solution – suicide – for their problems.

How can we help?

Although I cannot speak for the guy at university, in hindsight I now recognise some of the signs of suicide in my old classmate. More importantly, if I am ever in contact with a suicidal person again, I now know what I can do to help. Although the ultimate help for any suicidal person will be psychiatric, as friends, we can also do our part by:

- Taking all talk of suicide seriously and not assuming that persons who talk about suicide will not really do it.
- Offering a listening ear. By doing this we will reassure the person that they are not alone and that we are always willing to help.
- Communicating openly with the person. Rather than skirt around the issue of suicide we should discuss it openly without showing shock or disapproval. In this way, we will show the individual that we are taking them seriously, and in effect, responding to the severity of their distress.

When it all comes down to the nitty gritty, all that we do, should be aimed at encouraging the person to get psychiatric help. As friends, or even Peer Counsellors, we are not professionals and therefore cannot assume that the person will get better with our help alone or, worse yet, if we leave them alone.

Although the individual may at first resist the suggestion to seek professional help, with persistence on our part, they may eventually succumb. Furthermore, if he/she is particularly resistant to the idea, we can let them know that we cannot deal with this problem alone and seek their permission to approach a more experienced person whom we trust.

Everyone needs to do their part to stop this plague of suicide afflicting our young people. Are you ready to do your part? Call any of the telephone numbers listed below for help if you suspect that one of your peers may be contemplating suicide.

Families In Action - 628-2333/ 622-6952
LIFELINE - 645-2800/ 645-6616
CHILDLINE - 800-4321