

Suicidal Ideation: When and How to Act

“I wish I had never been born!” This can mean any number of things but, unfortunately, not everyone realizes this can be a cry for help. There may be a much deeper issue that could lead a teen or child to contemplate taking their own life. Many people want to help those who are experiencing suicidal ideation. However, they may be unsure what to do or how to recognize the severity of the situation, or just think that the person is saying these types of things to gain attention.

There are two different types of suicidal ideation. There is “passive” ideation, which is when an individual has vague ideas or thoughts about suicide or dying because they want some sort of pain to end. Passive suicidal ideation usually does not lead to attempting suicide. Luckily, most cases of passive ideation either resolve themselves or the individual gets help early in this stage, preventing an attempt. The other form of ideation is “active.” Active ideation occurs when an individual has persistent thoughts of death or suicide. They feel hopeless, lost, and cannot get those thoughts about dying or killing themselves out of their head no matter how hard they try. Once someone is in an active suicidal ideation mindset, they are at a higher risk of attempting and/or possibly completing suicide.

There are many risk factors that can lead to suicidal ideation. It can be related to mental health or physical health but can also be related to issues such as social difficulties. Examples of social difficulties are bullying or poor social relationships; lack of family support; abuse of any kind; or substance and alcohol abuse. It can even be a genetic issue. Teens who have had family members die by suicide or who have attempted suicide are more likely to suffer from suicidal ideation and depression.

Warning signs that someone is having suicidal ideation or thoughts can differ from youth to youth. Not everyone is the same, especially when it comes to how they handle stress. Some common signs include agitation, anger, depression, anxiety, changes in personality, self-destructive behavior, risky behaviors, changes in sleep, changes in eating habits, mood swings, talking about death, giving away possessions without reason, isolation, finding the means to attempt suicide (like stockpiling medication or getting a gun), saying goodbye to people more frequently, and expressing hopelessness, or feeling trapped.

If someone exhibits warning signs of suicidal ideation, what are the next steps? As a parent or educator, you can do many things if you notice these changes or signs. You may even have a “gut feeling” that something isn’t right. Being supportive, understanding, and non-judgmental will let them know they can talk to you and trust you to help them. Take steps to remove the means they are planning to use. Talk openly to them and acknowledge that you see them and that they are struggling. It will feel awkward, but if you suspect someone is suicidal, ask them directly, “Do you have thoughts of killing yourself?” Although some people are hesitant to ask this question, it will not put the idea in their head if it is not already there. Instead, it will open up a dialogue for them to talk about their struggle and, if they are suicidal, it will give them a caring ear to talk to. Lastly, watch for signs of substance use. If there are signs, seek help immediately. Substances can increase these thoughts and lower one’s inhibitions, making it more likely they will follow through with attempting suicide.

Teens these days are under a lot of stress. When you add complicating factors, such as COVID-19 stressors like quarantine, changes in school, not seeing friends every day, family members, friends or themselves getting sick or possibly dying, it can affect perspectives. While suicide has always been a concern, especially among teens and young adults, COVID-19 stressors add to those risk factors.

If you suspect someone is suicidal, ask them, and encourage them to seek help. Never ignore the signs or that feeling that someone is suicidal, especially if someone says things like “*I wish I were dead!*”. Who knows, you may save a life.

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