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NEWSLETTER

Issue 19

Helping Someone Who May Be Suicidal

General Information

Suicide is a major, yet preventable cause of death in Canada. In 1996, there were 3,941 suicides in Canada – almost 11 each day. Suicide is the third leading cause of potential years of life lost, preceded only by cancer and accidents.

Individuals who suffer from clinical mood disorders have a higher risk of suicide, but not all suicide victims have mood disorders. Stressful events, such as a sudden loss, trauma, and abuse, can lead to depression and thoughts of suicide. More men commit suicide than women, though more women attempt suicide.

It can be very frightening to find out that someone you care about is considering suicide, but there are ways for you to help. If depression is recognized and treated, suicidal thoughts can be eliminated. Many suicides can be prevented.

There is no “typical” suicide victim. Fortunately, there are warning signs that, if acted upon, can save lives. Here are some warning signs to watch for:

Warning Signs

A person may be suicidal if he or she:

- Talks about committing suicide; it is not true that if a person talks about suicide he or she will not do it. It is extremely important to take these remarks seriously.
- Shows signs of depression
- Has trouble eating or sleeping
- Experiences drastic changes in behavior
- Withdraws from friends and/or social activities
- Loses interest in hobbies, work, school, etc.
- Prepares for death by making out a will and final arrangements
- Gives away prized possessions
- Has attempted suicide before
- Makes statements about hopelessness, helplessness or worthlessness.
- Takes unnecessary risks (reckless driving, walking in front of traffic)
- Has had recent severe losses (a death in the family, divorce, job loss, ended relationship)
- Is preoccupied with death and dying
- Loses interest in their personal appearance
- Increases their use of alcohol or drugs

Helping Someone Who May Be Suicidal (*continued*)

What to Do

Take it seriously.

If someone you know is at risk of suicide or threatening to commit suicide, take the threat seriously. No suicide attempt should be dismissed or treated lightly.

Listen.

Give the person every opportunity to express her feelings. Allow her to unburden her troubles by talking about them to you. You don't need to say much and there are no magic words. If you are concerned, your voice and manner will show it. Treat the person with patience, sympathy, and acceptance. Avoid arguments and advice giving. Do not judge what you are being told.

Ask: "are you having thoughts of suicide?"

Contrary to popular belief, you will not give the person the idea by talking about suicide. By asking this question you are showing the individual that you care about her, and that you take her seriously. If the person is having thoughts of suicide, ask direct questions about her plan. "Do you have a plan?" "Do you know how you would do it?" "Do you know when?" "Do you have access to what you would use?" The more detailed the plan, the greater the immediate risk.

If the person is in immediate danger, do not leave her alone!

A suicidal person must see a doctor or psychiatrist immediately. You may have to take her to the nearest hospital emergency room or call 911. If the means are present, try to get rid of them. Remove any guns or pills from the home.

Do not be sworn to secrecy.

Helping someone who is suicidal can be very stressful. Get help – ask someone you trust for assistance and to share the responsibility. Do not try to do it all alone.

Try to get the person to see a trained counselor.

Do not be surprised if the person refuses to go to a counselor – but be persistent. Below is a list of professionals who can help.

Get professional help!

Contact:

- Your FSEAP Professional
- A community mental health agency
- A private therapist or counselor
- A school counselor or psychologist
- A family physician
- A suicide prevention or crisis centre. The phone number for your local crisis hotline can be found in the front of your local phone book or call 911.
- Your local hospital emergency department

References:

American Association of Suicidology; "Understanding and Helping the Suicidal Person." Accessed June 2001. <http://www.suicidology.org/understandingsuicide.htm>
Health Canada; *Suicide in Canada: Update of the report of the Task Force on Suicide in Canada*. Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services Canada, 1994
Metanoia; "What Can I Do to Help Someone Who May Be Suicidal?" Accessed June 2001. <http://www.metanoia.org/suicide/whattodo.htm>
Marcus, Eric; *Why Suicide?: Answers to 200 of the Most Frequently Asked Questions about Suicide, Attempted Suicide, & Assisted Suicide*. Toronto: HarperCollins Canada, 1996.
National Mental Health Association (American); "Suicide – General Information." Accessed June 2001. <http://www.nmha.org/infoctr/factsheets/81.cfm>
SA/VE; "Is Someone You Know Thinking About Suicide?" Accessed June 2001. <http://www.save.org>
Statistics Canada; *Statistical Report on the Health of Canadians*. Ottawa: Ministry of Public Works and Government Services, 1999

Family Services offers confidential professional assistance on a wide variety of personal and work-related issues. For more information on your EAP, call:

1-800-668-9920