



Suicide

Ethan felt like there was no point going on with life. Things had been tough since his mom died. His dad was working two jobs and seemed frazzled and angry most of the time. Whenever he and Ethan talked, it usually ended in yelling.

Ethan had just found out he'd failed a math test, and he was afraid of how mad and disappointed his dad would be. In the past, he always talked things over with his girlfriend — the only person who seemed to understand. But they'd broken up the week before, and now Ethan felt he had nowhere to turn.

Ethan knew where his dad kept his guns. But as he was unlocking the cabinet, he heard his kid sister arriving home from school. He didn't want Grace to be the person to find him, so he put the gun back and went to watch TV with her instead. Later, when he realized how close he'd come to ending his life, Ethan was terrified. He summoned the courage to talk to his dad. After a long conversation, he realized how much his dad cared. All he could think of was how he'd almost thrown it all away.

Why Do Teens Try to Kill Themselves?

Most teens interviewed after making a suicide attempt say that they did it because they were trying to escape from a situation that seemed impossible to deal with or to get relief from really bad thoughts or feelings. Like Ethan, they didn't want to die as much as they wanted to escape from what was going on. And at that particular moment dying seemed like the only way out.

Some people who end their lives or attempt suicide might be trying to escape feelings of rejection, hurt, or loss. Others might be angry, ashamed, or guilty about something. Some people may be worried about disappointing friends or family members. And some may feel unwanted, unloved, victimized, or like they're a burden to others.

We all feel overwhelmed by difficult emotions or situations sometimes. But most people get through it or can put their problems in perspective and find a way to carry on with determination and hope. So why does one person try suicide when another person in the same tough situation does not? What makes some people more resilient (better able to deal with life's setbacks and difficulties) than others? What makes a person unable to see another way out of a bad situation besides ending his or her life?

The answer to those questions lies in the fact that most people who commit suicide have depression.

Depression

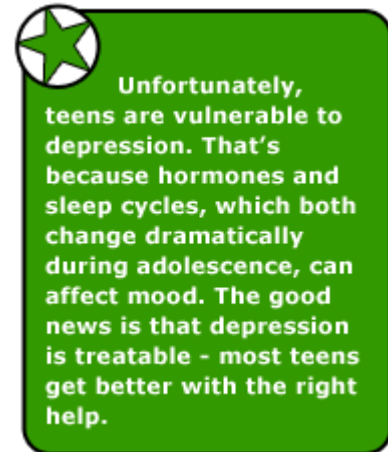
Depression leads people to focus mostly on failures and disappointments, to emphasize the negative side of their situations, and to downplay their own capabilities or worth. Someone with severe depression is unable to see the possibility of a good outcome and may believe they will never be happy or things will never go right for them again.

Depression affects a person's thoughts in such a way that the person doesn't see when a problem can be overcome. It's as if the depression puts a filter on the person's thinking that distorts things. That's why depressed people don't realize that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem in the same way that other people do. A teen with depression may feel like there's no other way out of problems, no other escape from emotional pain, or no other way to communicate their desperate unhappiness.

Sometimes people who feel suicidal may not even realize they are depressed. They are unaware that it is the depression — not the situation — that's influencing them to see things in a "there's no way out," "it will never get better," "there's nothing I can do" kind of way.

When depression lifts because a person gets the proper therapy or treatment, the distorted thinking is cleared. The person can find pleasure, energy, and hope again. But while someone is seriously depressed, suicidal thinking is a real concern.

People with a condition called bipolar disorder are also more at risk for suicide because their condition can cause them to go through times when they are extremely depressed as well as times when they have abnormally high or frantic energy (called mania or manic). Both of these extreme phases of bipolar disorder affect and distort a person's mood, outlook, and judgment. For people with this condition, it can be a challenge to keep problems in perspective and act with good judgment.



Substance Abuse

Teens with alcohol and drug problems are also more at risk for suicidal thinking and behavior. Alcohol and some drugs have depressive effects on the brain. Misuse of these substances can bring on serious depression. That's especially true for some teens who already have a tendency to depression because of their biology, family history, or other life stressors.

The problem can be made worse because many people who are depressed turn to alcohol or drugs as an escape. But they may not realize that the depressive effects alcohol and drugs have on the brain can actually intensify depression in the long run.

In addition to their depressive effects, alcohol and drugs alter a person's judgment. They interfere with the ability to assess risk, make good choices, and think of solutions to problems. Many suicide attempts occur when a person is under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

This doesn't mean that everyone who is depressed or who has an alcohol or drug problem will try to kill themselves, of course. But these conditions — especially both together — increase a person's risk for suicide.

Suicide Is Not Always Planned

Sometimes a depressed person plans a suicide in advance. Many times, though, suicide attempts happen impulsively, in a moment of feeling desperately upset. A situation like a breakup, a big fight with a parent, an unintended pregnancy, being outed by someone else, or being victimized in any way can cause someone to feel desperately upset. Often, a situation like this, on top of an existing depression, acts like the final straw.

Some people who attempt suicide mean to die and some aren't completely sure they want to die. For some, a suicide attempt is a way to express deep emotional pain. They can't say how they feel, so, for them, attempting suicide feels like the only way to get their message across. Sadly, many people who really didn't mean to kill themselves end up dead or critically ill.

Warning Signs

There are often signs that someone may be thinking about or planning a suicide attempt. Here are some of them:

- talking about suicide or death in general
- talking about "going away"
- referring to things they "won't be needing," and giving away possessions
- talking about feeling hopeless or feeling guilty
- pulling away from friends or family and losing the desire to go out
- having no desire to take part in favorite things or activities
- having trouble concentrating or thinking clearly
- experiencing changes in eating or sleeping habits
- engaging in self-destructive behavior (drinking alcohol, taking drugs, or cutting, for example)

What if This Is You?

If you have been thinking about suicide, get help now. Depression is powerful. You can't wait and hope that your mood might improve. When a person has been feeling down for a long time, it's hard to step back and be objective.

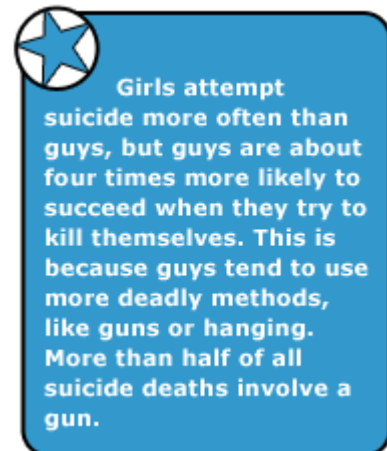
Talk to someone you trust as soon as you can. If you can't talk to a parent, talk to a coach, a relative, a school counselor, a religious leader, or a teacher. Call a suicide crisis line (such as 1-800-SUICIDE or 1-800-999-9999) or your local emergency number (911). These toll-free lines are staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by trained professionals who can help you without ever knowing your name or seeing your face. All calls are confidential — no one you know will find out that you've called. They are there to help you figure out how to work through tough situations.

What if It's Someone You Know?

It is always a good thing to start a conversation with someone you think may be considering suicide. It allows you to get help for the person, and just talking about it may help the person to feel less alone and more cared about and understood.

Talking things through may also give the person an opportunity to consider other solutions to problems. Most of the time, people who are considering suicide are willing to talk if someone asks them out of concern and care. Because people who are depressed are not as able to see answers as well as others, it can help to have someone work with them in coming up with at least one other way out of a bad situation.

Even if a friend or classmate swears you to secrecy, you must get help as soon as possible — your friend's life could depend on it. Someone who is seriously thinking about suicide may have sunk so deeply into an emotional hole that the person could be unable to recognize that he or she needs help. Tell an adult you trust as soon as possible.



If necessary, you can also call the toll-free number for a suicide crisis line or a local emergency number (911). You can find local suicide crisis or hotline numbers listed in your phone book. These are confidential resources and the people at any of these places are happy to talk to you to help you figure out what is best to do.

Sometimes, teens who make a suicide attempt — or who die as a result of suicide — seem to give no clue beforehand. This can leave loved ones feeling not only grief stricken but guilty and wondering if they missed something. It is important for family members and friends of those who die by suicide to know that sometimes there is no warning and they should not blame themselves.

When someone dies by suicide the people left behind can wrestle with a terrible emotional pain. Teens who have had a recent loss or crisis or who had a family member or classmate who committed suicide may be especially vulnerable to suicidal thinking and behavior themselves.

If you've been close to someone who has attempted or committed suicide, it can help to talk with a therapist or counselor — someone who is trained in dealing with this complex issue. Or, you could join a group for survivors where you can share your feelings and get the support of people who have been in the same situation as you.

Coping With Problems

Being a teen is not easy. There are many new social, academic, and personal pressures. And for teens who have additional problems to deal with, such as living in violent or abusive environments, life can feel even more difficult.

Some teens worry about sexuality and relationships, wondering if their feelings and attractions are normal, or if they will be loved and accepted. Others struggle with body image and eating problems; trying to reach an impossible ideal leaves them feeling bad about themselves. Some teens have learning problems or attention problems that make it hard for them to succeed in school. They may feel disappointed in themselves or feel they are a disappointment to others.

These problems can be difficult and draining — and can lead to depression if they go on too long without relief or support. We all struggle with painful problems and events at times. How do people get through it without becoming depressed? Part of it is staying connected to family, friends, school, faith, and other support networks. People are better able to deal with tough circumstances when they have at least one person who believes in them, wants the best for them, and in whom they can confide. People also cope better when they keep in mind that most problems are temporary and can be overcome.

When struggling with problems, it helps to:

- Tell someone you trust what's going on with you.
- Be around people who are caring and positive.
- Ask someone to help you figure out what to do about a problem you're facing.



Suicide attempts are highest during middle adolescence. By about age 17 or 18, the rate of suicide attempts drops. This may be because older teens have learned to tolerate sad or upset moods, know how to get the support they need, and have developed better coping skills.

- Work with a therapist or counselor if problems are getting you down and depressed — or if you don't have a strong support network, or feel you can't cope.

Counselors and therapists can provide emotional support and can help teens build their own coping skills for dealing with problems. It can also help to join a support network for people who are going through the same problems — for example, anorexia and body image issues, living with an alcoholic family member, or sexuality and sexual health concerns. These groups can help provide a caring environment where you can talk through problems with people who share your concerns.

Check out your phone book to find local support groups, or ask a school counselor or a youth group leader to help you find what you need.

Reviewed by: Matthew K. Nock, PhD

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Note: All information on TeensHealth® is for educational purposes only. For specific medical advice, diagnoses, and treatment, consult your doctor.

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