



THE NASW SHIFT PROJECT: SUICIDE PREVENTION FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS

WARNING SIGNS

Suicide risk factors refer to a person’s susceptibility to suicidal thoughts or ideations, gestures, and attempts, and narrow the scope to those persons most at-risk. For example, an adolescent girl who suffers from depression (*risk factor*) is more likely to be suicidal than an adolescent girl not suffering from depression.

Knowing the risk factors is imperative. Knowing the warning signs is vital.

Warning signs are indicators associated with acute suicide risk. While suicide is not typical, many of the warning signs are.

Recognizing **Warning signs of adolescent suicide** is critical, because there is often a small window of opportunity for parents, mental health professionals, and others to develop a plan of action

WARNING SIGNS...

- Differ from risk factors in that they represent a clear set of indicators suggestive of *imminent* threat of harm to oneself
- Hold a proximal (e.g., few hours, days, or weeks) rather than distal (months to a year or longer) relationship to suicidal behaviors, including thoughts and ideations
- Enable parents, professionals, and the public to identify teenagers most at-risk of suicide and to

respond appropriately as soon as the behaviors are demonstrated

Recognizing warnings signs is critical to mental health screening and the prevention of adolescent suicide.

KNOW THE WARNING SIGNS

Signs that may precipitate (adolescent) suicide can include:

- Behavior changes, severe anxiety, or extreme agitation
- Withdrawing from family, friends, and society
- Engaging in risky behaviors or activities
- Displaying dramatic mood changes
- Communicating an intent to kill or harm oneself or other suicide “talk”
- Preoccupation with death and dying
- Increasing alcohol and drug use
- Giving away special possessions
- Loss of interest in usual activities
- Difficulty with sleep and appetite
- Actively looking for ways to kill oneself
- Dramatic changes in personal appearance

A small percentage of suicidal teen girls will not exhibit any warning signs. However, most will demonstrate one to several signs. It is important to know that warning signs may overlap or be concealed by typical adolescent behaviors, thus making them more difficult to detect in some instances.

WARNING SIGNS	RISK FACTORS
Represent a potential for immediate risk of harm	May not always indicate <i>imminent</i> risk for suicide
Proximal relationship to suicide behavior	Tendency toward distal relationship to suicide behavior
May be easily concealed or difficult to recognize	More widely recognized





Changes in Behavior for *no apparent reason* may be a warning sign for (adolescent) suicide:

- A typically shy and reserved teenage girl starts to engage in excessive risk-taking behaviors, such as unprotected sex with multiple partners
- An outgoing teen girl becomes quiet and withdrawn—keeps to herself and avoids interacting with family and close friends.
- A teenage girl becomes “uncharacteristically” irritable around family and friends; she may respond with physical or verbal aggression or both.

Displays of dramatic mood changes may often include episodes of intense anger, irritability, and verbal or physical aggression. However, a sudden or extreme display of calm and peace following one or more episodes of extreme behavior can also be a warning for suicidal behavior.

Suicide talk can pose as a warning for imminent threat of harm and should be taken seriously. Suicide talk includes any statement with reference to harming or killing oneself, including:

- “I might as well be dead” or “I wish I were dead”
- “You won’t have to worry about me ever again”
- “No one would miss me if I weren’t around”
- “You would be better off without me”
- “Nobody cares about me anyway”
- “Does God forgive suicide?”
- “I hate my life”
- “I’m going away for a long time”

Any *direct threat of harm to oneself* should also be considered a warning and be followed by immediate action. Appropriate actions include obtaining an in depth suicide assessment or contacting a mental health professional who can further assess and screen for suicide risk.

Alcohol and substance use is both a risk factor and a warning sign for suicide among teen girls. Alcohol and drugs may be used by teen girls to numb emotional pain and turmoil, or to relieve symptoms of depression, with or without intent to commit suicide. Alcohol and certain other drugs have an inherent depressant effect, which can lower inhibitions and increase impulsivity.

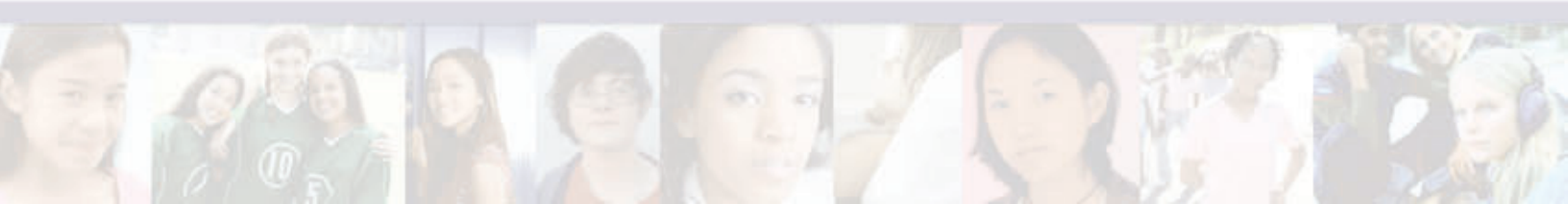
Consequently, a teenage girl with an underlying risk for suicide may feel worse while intoxicated and impulsively—or with intent—commit a fatally or potentially fatal act that she would have not done if sober. For some teen girls, an increase in alcohol or drug use could be an attempt to achieve the “courage” needed to carry out an act of suicide.

Giving away special or treasured possessions is not atypical for a teenage girl at risk for suicide. Treasured or special possessions may include a music collection, favorite books, stuffed animals, jewelry, or other memory keepsakes. In giving away these special mementos, the at-risk adolescent girl is not only attempting to ensure that her “treasures” will be cared for, but is also trying to reach out for help.

A **preoccupation with death and dying** may include journaling or writing notes and poetry about suicide or death, drawing pictures or sketches of people dying, or continuously talking or joking about death, dying, and suicide. A preoccupation may manifest in dreams, which a suicidal teen girl may share with others. These, too, should be considered a warning sign for suicidal behavior.

A sudden or incremental **loss of interest in a favorite hobby or activity** over a period of a few days to a couple of weeks should trigger as a warning sign. For example, a teen girl who typically enjoys listening to music, journaling, or making crafts suddenly loses interest. It should be noted that—for some suicidal teen girls—a loss of interest in a favorite activity may be coupled with a withdrawal from family and close friends.

Difficulty with sleep or appetite can vary. It may range from sleeping too much to too little, or having trouble falling or staying asleep. The same may be said for appetite. It is important to note that changes in sleep patterns and appetite may represent a heightened concern for teen girls known to suffer from eating disorders, such as anorexia, or other problems associated with body image. Anorexia is one of the leading risk factors for suicide in teen girls.





In most instances, **actively looking for ways to kill oneself**, such as asking about or attempting to acquire a gun, hoarding pills, or searching the Internet for methods of suicide, should trigger a warning for suicide behavior in a teen girl. Also, parents and other caregivers should be mindful of prescription or over-the-counter medications that suddenly go missing.

Dramatic changes in the personal appearance of a teen girl may be a reflection of her inner “climate” or mood. Cause for concern may be warranted for a teen girl who suddenly begins wearing black or other dark clothing only, or who becomes less concerned about personal hygiene and cleanliness, especially if in occurrence of other warning signs.

Warning signs of adolescent suicide have not been as widely studied as risk factors. In fact, in much of the research and literature on adolescent suicide, warning signs are not generally distinguished from risk factors. There is often a notion of a stronger relationship

between suicide behavior and certain risk factors than actually exists.

For example, the majority of adolescent girls diagnosed and treated for depression and other mood disorders do not commit or attempt to commit suicide. To focus on depression as a symptom or “warning” of suicide may be ineffective in screening and preventing adolescent suicide.

This tendency represents a gap in both practice and research. Consequently, further research on warning signs is needed to more effectively guide practice in screening and preventing adolescent suicide among teen girls.

EVERY suicide warning sign should be taken seriously.

