

Warning Signs of Mental Illness and Suicide

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Each illness has its own set of symptoms but some common signs of mental illness in adults and adolescents can include the following:

- Excessive worrying or fear.
- Feeling excessively sad or low (for more than two weeks).
- Confused thinking or problems concentrating and learning.
- Extreme mood changes, including uncontrollable “highs” or feelings of euphoria.
- Prolonged or strong feelings of irritability or anger.
- Avoiding hanging out with friends and not going to class.
- Difficulties understanding or relating to other people.
- Changes in sleeping habits or feeling tired and low energy.
- Changes in eating habits such as increased hunger or lack of appetite, excessive exercise.
- Changes in sex drive—though teens may obviously not easily report this to adults it is good for them to know it is symptom of emotional distress.
- Difficulty perceiving reality (delusions or hallucinations, in which a person experiences and senses things that don't exist in objective reality).
- Inability to perceive changes in one's own feelings, behavior or personality (lack of insight).
- Abuse of substances like alcohol or drugs.
- Multiple physical ailments without obvious causes (such as headaches, stomach aches, vague and ongoing “aches and pains”).
- Thinking about suicide.
- Inability to carry out daily activities or handle daily problems and stress.
- An intense fear of weight gain or concern with appearance.

What Should Adults or Teen Leaders Do if They Think a Teen is Showing These Signs?

- Ask the teen about how they are feeling—convey concern and interest without just focusing on symptoms.
- Ask if they are feeling worried, sad, confused.
- Acknowledge their feelings rather than trying to talk them out of the feelings—don't tell them how much they have to be happy about, that everything will be ok, or to think of others with worse problems even if that is what comes to mind. Acknowledging their feelings is called validating.
- Offer positive response to their willingness to share, let them know many teens have these feelings and that help is available, they don't have to continue to suffer.
- Do not be afraid to ask about whether they have thought of or actually harmed themselves or considered suicide. No one becomes suicidal because of being asked. If the answer is yes, take it seriously, get them to help and let parents or other adults know even if it means breaking a confidence.
- Let them know about common mental health symptoms and counseling resources—and follow up to see how they are doing.
- Get other adults involved.

The Warning Signs of Suicide

Four out of five teens that attempt suicide give clear warnings. If you suspect that a child or adolescent is suicidal, look for these warning signs:

- Threats of suicide—either direct or indirect.
- Verbal hints such as “I won’t be around much longer” or “It’s hopeless.
- Obsession with death.
- Overwhelming sense of guilt, shame or rejection.
- Putting affairs in order (for example, giving or throwing away favorite possessions).
- Sudden cheerfulness after a period of depression.
- Dramatic change in personality or appearance.
- Irritability.
- Hallucinations or bizarre thoughts.
- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns.
- Changes in school performance (obviously not by itself a sign of being suicidal).

What Should Parents and Other Adults Do if They Think a Child is Suicidal?

- Ask the child or teen if he or she feels depressed or thinks about suicide or death. Speaking openly and honestly allows the child to confide in you and gives you a chance to express your concern. Listen to his or her thoughts and feelings in a caring and respectful manner.
- Let the child or teen know that you care and want to help.
- Supply the child or teen with local resources, such as a crisis hotline or the location of a mental health clinic. If the child or teen is a student, find out if there are any available mental health professionals at the school and let the child know about them.
- Seek professional help. It is essential to seek expert advice from a mental health professional that has experience helping depressed children and teens.
- Alert key adults in the child's life—clergy, youth group leaders, family, friends, teachers, etc. Inform the child's parents or primary caregiver, and recommend that they seek professional assistance for their child or teen.
- Trust your instincts. If you think the situation may be serious, seek immediate help—do not leave the teen alone. If necessary, break a confidence in order to save a life.