

Myths and facts about suicide

A Communities Matter factsheet

Over the years, many myths and misinformation have influenced our beliefs and way of thinking about suicide. Here we dispel some of the more common misunderstandings.

MYTH: People who talk about suicide just want attention.

FACT: Talking about suicide is a warning sign. Warning signs should be listened to.

MYTH: Asking someone if they are suicidal will put the idea into their mind.

FACT: Asking someone about suicide directly opens up the channels to talk honestly and openly about the problem. They feel listened to and better able to identify what is happening for them.

MYTH: If a person wants to take their life nothing can stop it happening.

FACT: Thoughts of suicide are usually a response to intense psychological pain that the person has been unable to manage rather than a desire to die.

MYTH: If you promised to keep someone's suicide plans secret you should always keep that promise.

FACT: You should never promise to keep suicide plans a secret. Telling you about the plan can be a sign they want help. It's a massive burden to carry should that person act on those plans.

MYTH: People who attempt suicide and survive never try again.

FACT: Many people who die by suicide have attempted in the past. A previous attempt is one of the strongest predictors of future death by suicide so it is important to take all attempts seriously, even if they do not appear life threatening.

MYTH: A sudden improvement means everything is getting better and the danger time for the person to attempt suicide has passed.

FACT: It could be the complete opposite. It could mean that the person has made a final decision to die by suicide and feels "at peace" because they believe they may be closer to ending their pain.

MYTH: Most suicidal people never ask for help.

FACT: People may not ask for help directly. Many people seek help from friends. Many people contact their doctor or a health professional in the three months before attempting suicide. Many people may not be aware of the indicators that someone may be at risk of suicide.

MYTH: Suicide happens without warning.

FACT: Often there are signs that someone has been thinking about suicide for some time, but these can be difficult to pick up, especially if the person goes to great lengths to hide how they are feeling.

MYTH: The only people who can really help are professionals such as psychiatrists, psychologists, counsellors etc.

FACT: There are many people who can help. Most important are the people "there", including family and friends. Everyone can be part of creating a suicide safe community.

MYTH: Suicidal people are always mentally ill.

FACT: Suicide is complex and many factors can be involved. We know that mental health problems, particularly depression, can increase vulnerability to suicide. But having a mental health problem doesn't mean a person will have thoughts of suicide - many don't. Still, mental health problems can affect motivation and openness to seek help and so we need to be particularly aware of the possible risk of suicide.

If you feel someone's life is in danger, call emergency on 000.

If someone you know needs urgent crisis counselling, there are several free 24/7 telephone services including Lifeline on 13 11 14 and the Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.

And remember...

- Take all threats seriously
- Ask the person to tell you what is wrong
- Listen and offer support
- Remove anything that could be dangerous
- Don't leave the suicidal person alone
- Be positive and point out choices
- Don't promise confidentiality
- Get professional help.

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Suicide prevention for small towns and local communities