

Preventing the teenage Suicide

What are the signs and how can we help our youth? Teen suicide rates are as high as they have ever been in Australia and are alarming. Sadly, a US survey showed suicides are a leading cause of death for young people aged 15 to 24. The rate of suicidal deaths in migrant families and ethnic communities is a cause for concern and there are several difficulties that these young people face. This can include social disadvantage and family problems. For example, there are higher rates of homelessness in teens from vulnerable families and they have fewer social supports.

Then, there are suicide attempts that may not be successful, but can create risk for the future in young people. These risk issues are an important consideration. Clinicians working with suicide, note, that those who make more suicide attempts are often more likely to succeed. There can be a change in personality and a previously social young adult might become withdrawn, lose interest in what they enjoyed doing, Google ways to die, or write good bye notes. Conversely, in some situations, it is a shock for people when they are taken aback at the news of a suicide that seems completely out of character. People often comment how the person in question was cheerful or engaging and didn't seem to have problems. There were no signs and it was a sudden decision that nobody saw coming.

The big issue is recognising that depression and mental illness can be hard to spot as teenagers can hide how they truly feel and avoid asking for help. Peer pressure can be subtle or extreme and socially anxious teens are more at risk of getting overwhelmed by these factors. Young adults are also very sensitive to family conflict, domestic violence, confusion about relationships, and losses in their lives. It is very important to reach out to encourage good communication between teenagers and their friends, family, and teachers. Reducing isolation can be a key factor in dealing with highly intense emotions and encourage problem-solving skills. It is not helpful to keep these feelings a secret with your child as a parent, as this can build up into a bigger problem as time goes on, and delay help seeking.

For a teenager, it can be a relief to discuss their losses and find ways to build self-confidence and a support network for what is happening in their life. Developing a positive view of life and hope for the future can be very pivotal in working through difficult feelings. This can be very powerful in changing overwhelming situations that feel impossible to control. Adults can have a lot more control in their life than younger age groups, and it is a lot more disempowering for a young person to feel their life is spiralling out of control, than an adult. Feelings of guilt about being a burden or everyone being better off without them are very powerful emotions. This can build a sense of helplessness and hopelessness that increases the risk of an extreme response such as a decision to escape from the situation.

It is important to talk to a professional to help with looking at the situation earlier rather than leaving it for too long. For example, medical advice is important about factors such as sleep, appetite, mood changes, and any medical issues that might need to be considered. In terms of making changes in how to deal with one's thoughts and feelings, mental health clinicians, in particular, help with building positive thoughts that help change negative behaviours,

increase good mental health practices, and build good problem-solving skills. It is also important for friends and family of someone feeling suicidal to get advice and help about how to cope and to deal with their emotions. This is especially important for families who may not have too much support in migrant communities and might fear being judged or lose their friends and be blamed or stigmatised by what is happening. These are very confronting situations to deal with for everyone and opening up and talking to professionals and your support network can decrease the isolation and create very positive connections. Pick up the phone and talk to Lifeline, at any time. There is every chance that with support we can have happier and more empowered teens, who can learn to cope with negative thoughts, build resilience, and be a positive role model for their peers and own life as they grow into adulthood. We can reach out and make a difference with the smallest caring and compassionate gesture of hope. One small step can save a life.

Dr Raj Khillan

Director, Western Specialist Centre

www.westernspecialistcentre.com.au

