

Suicide and mental illness explained

Around 2,000 Australians die from suicide each year and there is no doubt that depression is a major cause. Of those who have killed themselves, many have experienced depression or bipolar disorder. For every person who dies from suicide, at least another 30 people attempt suicide.

Suicide is the major cause of premature death among people with mental illness. Up to one in 10 people affected by mental illness kill themselves.

With medical intervention, counselling, social support and time, however, many of those who have attempted suicide, or who have seriously thought about killing themselves, will go on to live full, productive lives.

An early warning sign of mental illness

A suicide attempt may be an early warning sign that a person is developing a mental illness. If this is the case, it is important to seek assessment and treatment for the person.

Contributing factors

Contributing factors to suicide may include:

- **Depression** – many people who suicide have experienced depression. This may be the result of another mental illness.
- **Psychosis** – some people suicide because they are confused as a result of their hallucinations or because they want to get away from the symptoms.
- **Drugs and alcohol** – misuse of marijuana, heroin, amphetamines and alcohol is closely related to suicidal behaviour.

Suicide warning signs

The majority of people who suicide give warning signs about their intentions. Some of the warning signs are:

- Expressions of hopelessness or helplessness
- An overwhelming sense of shame or guilt
- A dramatic change in personality or appearance, or irrational or bizarre behaviour
- Changed eating or sleeping habits
- A severe drop in school or work performance
- A lack of interest in the future
- Written or spoken notice of intention to commit suicide
- Giving away possessions and putting their affairs in order.

What to do if a relative or friend threatens suicide

If you think a friend or relative is at risk, discuss your concerns with them openly and non-judgementally. Also discuss your concerns with relevant professionals – for example, their doctor or a school counsellor. If someone you know is at serious risk of suicide, keep the phone number of a crisis service (such as Lifeline) handy in case you need urgent help.

After a suicide attempt

If the person has attempted suicide, a doctor or mental health professional in your area can provide education and support. It is important to realise that responsibility for an action ultimately lies with the person who carries it out. This can be hard to accept; however, if everything possible has been done and someone is still seriously determined to end their life, it can be very difficult to stop them.

If you have suicidal thoughts

It is very important to remember that thoughts about harming yourself or suicide are just thoughts. They do not mean you have to actually harm yourself.

There are a number of ways in which you can tackle suicidal thoughts:

- **Tell your doctor** or other sympathetic people. If your thoughts are associated with depression, delusions or other symptoms, a change in medication and treatment may help get rid of them.
- **Keep a list of people you can telephone** as well as the numbers for Lifeline and similar services. Make an agreement with one or more people that you will call them if you actually plan to attempt suicide.
- **Remember you do not have to act on suicidal thoughts** and that they will pass in time.

Where to get help

- SANE Australia Tel. 1800 18 SANE (7263)
- Lifeline Tel. 131 114
- Kids Helpline (for children aged under 18) Tel. 1800 55 1800
- Your doctor, for information and referral

Things to remember

- Suicide is a major cause of premature death among people with mental illness.
- Depression is a major cause of suicide.
- Thoughts about harming yourself or suicide are just thoughts and do not mean you have to actually harm yourself.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

SANE Australia

This Better Health Channel fact sheet has passed through a rigorous approval process. The information provided was accurate at the time of publication and is not intended to take the place of medical advice. Please seek advice from a qualified health care professional.

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