Suicide Primer: Signs, Symptoms, and Risk Factors

Featuring Survivor Stories
Not Another Life to Lose: Bridge to Zero

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Co-lead, Clinical Care & Intervention Task Force, National Action Alliance on Suicide Prevention
Forbes 2010 “The Forgotten Patients”

Eliminating “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”
Different Kinds of Battles

Major General Mark Graham (retired)

Pictured here with his wife Carol Graham
Different Kinds of Battles

Kevin & Jeff Graham
Life Is a Gift

Kevin Hines

International speaker and advocate of living mentally well
Life Is a Gift

Kevin Hines is one of only 33 Golden Gate Bridge jump survivors.
More to Life than Death

Cheryl Sharp, MSW, ALWF

Special Advisor for Trauma-Informed Services, National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare
“Life is truly known only to those who suffer, lose, endure adversity, and stumble from defeat to defeat.”

Anais Nin
Walking Between Two Worlds

I often felt as if I was walking between two worlds; one where I desperately wanted to live but didn’t know how. The other was a world where I desperately wanted to cease to exist in order not to feel the emotional pain I lived with every day.
Suicide Doesn’t Happen in a Vacuum

> We are hard-wired with a desire to be connected to others and a desire to survive

> What happens that causes disconnection?

> What leads up to the overwhelm of a person’s emotional world that would cause us to want to end our lives?

> How do we move beyond a life of overwhelm and despair?
Hard Wired to Connect
Leading Up to Overwhelm

> Many of us do not recognize we are moving in a dangerous direction
> We often do not have the skills or internal resources to cope with the events that lead up to an attempt
> We may have tried to communicate our frustration and despair in other ways over a long period of time
> Feel tremendous shame because of our thoughts and feelings
> Feel that the world can’t contain our pain
Please…

Do Not

> Tell me I have so much to live for
> Tell me that everything is going to get better
> That I must go to the hospital
> Guilt trip me
> Shame, blame, or judge me
> Tell me to pull myself up by the bootstraps

Do

> Let me know you care
> Try to understand more about what I am going through
> Ask me what would be helpful
> Support me in getting help
> Share your experience of overcoming a dark time
> Offer hope based on your experience
What Made the Difference?

> Asking what happened to me rather than what is wrong with me?
> De-stigmatization of very strong emotions
> Safe and secure alternatives to hospitalization and medication when requested
> Belief in me until I could believe in myself
> Learning wellness tools that I could use to create the life I wanted and now have
Strategies that Worked

- Medication can be helpful but there is much more to recovery
- Wellness Recovery Action Planning® WRAP
  [www.mentalhealthrecovery.com](http://www.mentalhealthrecovery.com)
- Peer Support
- Taking personal responsibility for my own wellness
- Working with a therapist who understood that I was walking between two worlds – one where I wanted to live and one where I didn’t want to exist
- Time, patience and healing environments
- Being able to talk freely about what I was thinking without jumping to conclusions
“And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.”

Anais Nin
Mental Health First Aid

*National Council in partnership with Maryland and Missouri State Governments*

- More than 70,000 trained
- 2,000+ instructors
The Mental Health First Aid Action Plan

> Assess for risk of suicide or harm
> Listen nonjudgmentally
> Give reassurance and information
> Encourage appropriate professional help
> Encourage self-help and other support strategies

www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org
Suicide Risk Assessment

- Gender
- Age
- Chronic physical illness
- Mental illness
- Use of alcohol or other substances
- Less social support
- Previous attempt
- Organized plan
Warning Signs of Suicide

- Threatening to hurt or kill oneself
- Seeking access to means
- Talking or writing about death, dying, or suicide
- Feeling hopeless
- Feeling worthless or a lack of purpose
- Acting recklessly or engaging in risky activities
- Feeling trapped
- Increasing alcohol or drug use
- Withdrawing from family, friends, or society
- Demonstrating rage and anger or seeking revenge
- Appearing agitated
- Having a dramatic change in mood
Questions to Ask

Ask the person directly whether he or she is suicidal:

> “Are you having thoughts of suicide?”
> “Are you thinking about killing yourself?”
Questions to Ask

Ask the person whether he or she has a plan:

> “Have you decided how you are going to kill yourself?”

> “Have you decided when you would do it?”

> “Have you collected the things you need to carry out your plan?”
How to Talk With a Person Who Is Suicidal

> Discuss your observations with the person
> Ask the question without dread
> Do not express a negative judgment
> Appear confident, as this can be reassuring
Check for Two Other Risks

> Has the person been using alcohol or other drugs?

> Has he or she made a suicide attempt in the past?
Keeping the Person Safe

> Provide a safety contact number that is available at all times (1-800-273-TALK)

> Help the person think about people or things that have been supportive in the past

> Find out whether those supports are still available
Do NOT

> Leave an actively suicidal person alone
> Use guilt and threats to try to prevent suicide
  • You will go to hell.
  • You will ruin other people’s lives if you die by suicide.
> Agree to keep their plan a secret
Keeping the Person Safe

> Mental health professionals always advocate seeking professional help for someone who has suicidal thoughts.

> The person may be very reluctant to involve a professional helper.

> Try to involve the person in the decision making about what should be done, who should be told, and how to seek professional help.

> If the person has a weapon or is behaving aggressively, call law enforcement.
The Mental Health First Aid Action Plan

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www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org
Resources from the National Council

- Suicide in America infographic to share on social media
- Special magazine issue: Not Another Life to Lose, Suicide Prevention
- Mental Health First Aid trainings

Visit www.TheNationalCouncil.org