

PREVENTING SUICIDE : WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW AND HOW YOU CAN HELP



Though it can often be a difficult topic of discussion, the struggle against suicide is a very real and exhausting battle for many people. Figures from the Kansas Department of Health and Environment and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that approximately one Kansan and about 105 Americans lose that battle every day (KDHE, 2013; CDC, 2010). Knowing a little bit about the struggle and how to help the people that deal with thoughts of suicide can help them make different choices in their moment of crisis.

Though the act of suicide means taking one's own life, most people struggling with thoughts of suicide do not actually wish to die -- they only wish for their intense emotional pain to stop. The perspective of those struggling with suicide is distorted; rather than believing that they have a problem, they believe they *are* the problem, and they don't know how to solve that problem without taking themselves out of the equation.

The good news is that suicide is preventable, and everyone can help with the prevention efforts – including you! Estimates show that about 80% of people contemplating suicide give some indication of their intentions, and individuals are more likely to first tell a family member or friend about their struggle before telling a mental health provider (National Alliance on Mental Illness). It is important for you to know the warning signs of suicide because being able to recognize the signs and appropriately respond might mean saving a life.

Know the signs:

- Depression or another mental illness
- Sense of hopelessness
- Isolation
- Self-harming behaviors
- Changes in eating and/or sleeping habits
- Personality changes or mood swings
- Increase in reckless, high-risk behaviors (e.g. gambling, drug and/or alcohol use, etc.)
- Saying goodbye, making amends, and/or giving away possessions
- Sudden sense of calm following a period of distress

What to do when you notice these signs:

- Try to remain calm
- Express concern for the person and their safety
- Listen non-judgmentally to the person and validate the person's struggle
- Ask direct questions to determine if the person has a specific plan

- Remain with the person and/or keep them in a safe place
- Help connect them to the appropriate mental health professionals:
 - If they are in immediate danger or in a crisis state, call ComCare Crisis, 911, or the National Suicide Prevention Hotline
 - If they are experiencing suicidal thoughts but are not currently in a crisis state, encourage them to contact a trained mental health professional (e.g. therapist, counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist)

Though it may be difficult, avoid these responses:

- Promising to keep it a secret
- Minimizing the person's struggles or invalidating their feelings
- Trying to shame or guilt the person into changing their mind
- Debating the morality of suicide

Remember that though it sounds difficult to do, having an honest conversation with someone you are worried about is the only way to find out what they are thinking about doing before they do it. Talking about suicide with someone who is considering suicide doesn't make things worse – it can actually help make things better, because it can cause the person to realize that they need help and that they don't truly want to commit suicide. Alternatively, by asking a person directly about his thoughts and plans, you will gain a better understanding of the immediacy of the situation. A *more detailed plan with more urgent thoughts and easy access to the means in the plan indicates a greater level of risk.* Once you know the contents of the thoughts, you can keep the person accountable for his safety until he can get help from a trained mental health professional.

Also remember that suicide prevention is everyone's job. The closer you are to a person, the more likely you are to notice the warning signs in her life, and the stronger your relationship is with her, the more likely it is that she will trust you enough to allow you to help her. If we all remember the warning signs and commit to intervening when we see them, we have a better chance of preventing the tragedy of suicide in our community.

Resources for Help in a Crisis Situation

- ComCare Crisis: 316-660-7500
- National Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-800-273-8255
- 911

For more information or a free phone consultation, contact Cana Counseling at Catholic Charities, 316-263-6941, (1-866-839-4327), or visit www.canacounseling.org.



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