

The statistics are sobering. Almost 45,000 Americans die by suicide every year? (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention) For every suicide completed, 25 people attempt suicide. There are 123 suicides a day on average, and the overall suicide rate rose by 24 percent from 1999 to 2014. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) The numbers for adolescents are equally alarming. Suicide is the third leading cause of death for individuals aged 10 – 24.

September 7 – 12 is designated annually as National Suicide Prevention Week, and September 10 is World Suicide Prevention Day, with the purpose to inform and engage health professionals and the general public about [suicide prevention](#), to educate about the warning signs of [suicide](#), and to decrease the stigma surrounding suicide and mental health.

According to the National Council for Behavioral Health, suicide is the 10th leading cause of death. In 2013, suicide took the lives of 41,149 people – this was the second leading cause of death among individuals aged 15 – 35 years. This same year, 17 percent of high school students reported that they had seriously considered attempting suicide during the previous year. During any 12-month period, 3.7 percent of adults had serious thoughts about suicide, 1.1 percent made a plan, and .6 percent attempted suicide.

Understanding suicide and talking about it are not easy, whether are you approaching someone you care about or struggling with it yourself. If you are concerned about someone who you think might be struggling, the first step is to approach and engage that person, and then assess whether the person is in crisis. According to Mental Health First Aid, some factors that might make someone at risk for suicide include:

- Gender – males kill themselves more often than females, although females attempt suicide three times as often as males
- Age – adolescents and older adults pose a higher risk
- Chronic physical illness
- Mental illness – people who are depressed are more prone to suicide
- Use of alcohol or other substances
- Lack of social support
- A previous attempt
- Organized plan

These last two risk factors are the most significant indicators.

One of the myths surrounding suicide is the idea that if you ask a person directly about their suicidal intentions, you will encourage the person to kill themselves by putting the idea in their head. The opposite is actually true – asking someone directly about their suicidal feelings actually acts as a deterrent. Another myth is that someone who talks about suicide isn't really serious. If a person mentions suicide, it is always important to check if that person has definite intentions to take their own life. Ask directly if a person is suicidal by asking, "Are you having thoughts of suicide?" or "Are you thinking about killing yourself?" If the answer to either of these questions is "yes," follow up by asking, "Have you decided how you are going to kill yourself?" or "Have you decided when you would do it?"

A "yes" answer to any of these questions needs to be taken seriously. Let the person know that you are concerned and willing to help. Do not express negative judgment, and appear confident as this will be reassuring to the person. Do not leave this person alone; instead, help them to identify ways they can remain safe and helpful resources that they have used in the past. If they cannot guarantee their safety or a safety contact, or if they appear to be a threat to themselves or others, do not hesitate to call 911. It might give you some peace of mind to put the phone number for the National Suicide Prevention Hotline in your phone – you can share it with the person in need, or call the number in their presence. That number is 800-273-8255.

There is also a myth that suicide happens without warning. Studies show that there are often signs and clues that indicate suicidal intention. Some of these warning signs are:

- Threatening to hurt or kill themselves
- Seeking access to means
- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide on social media, or other places
- Expressing hopelessness
- Feeling worthless or expressing a lack of purpose
- Acting recklessly or engaging in risky activities
- Feeling trapped, like there is no way out
- Increased use of drugs or alcohol
- Withdrawing from friends, family, or society
- Appearing agitated
- Dramatic change in mood
- Demonstrating anger, rage, or seeking revenge

Suicide is not an easy topic to talk about. These are not easy steps to take and to be honest, none of us really want to find ourselves on either side of this conversation. But statistics don't lie: suicide is a real fact of the world we live in today, and death by suicide takes far too many lives.

If you would like to learn more about how to help someone in crisis, or just have a greater comfort level with having this type of conversation, you may want to consider attending a Mental Health First Aid training and becoming a Mental Health First Aider!

In Catholic Charities' continual effort to build parish and community partnerships, three counselors have been certified as Mental Health First Aid instructors, and are offering two trainings in the Archdiocese this fall: Saturday, September 29 in Waterloo, and Saturday, October 13 in Dubuque. Both are 8 ½ hour courses with lunch and snacks provided. Participants pay for the cost of the manual.

For more information, or to talk to a counselor call 1-800-772-2758.

Prayer Litany for Suicide Prevention Week

God, we celebrate the gift of life for each person. We commit to nurturing the wellbeing of each person here. We know for some, life is a burden filled with suffering. Help us to talk about our fears, our anger, and our despair with someone we trust. We celebrate that life has purpose and meaning. For some, purpose and meaning are like dry bones, dead and lifeless. Remind us that You know us by name. You know our place and purpose in this world. We are created to live in community. Some feel alone, unloved and disconnected. Give us courage to reach out with love to someone who needs us. May we be Your presence with them. Teach us to be gentle and non-judgmental. We remember those who ended their life before it was time. Comfort those who grieve and bring healing.

Resources

Burns, David MD (1999). *The Feeling Good Handbook*. New York; Quill Publishers

National Suicide Prevention Hotline 800-273-8255

Mental Health First Aid training 800-772-2758

Suicide Prevention Resource Center www.sprc.org

American Association of Suicidology www.suicidology.org