Myths about Suicide

Misinformation about suicide or depression – or the lack of information altogether – often means that individuals at risk can’t get the help they need in times of crisis. Removing these myths can help you save your own life or the life of someone you know.

**MYTH:** Talking about suicide or asking someone if they feel suicidal will encourage suicide attempts.

**FACT:** Talking about suicide provides the opportunity for communication. Most suicidal people are truthful and relieved when questioned about their feelings and intentions. Fears that are shared are more likely to diminish. The first step in encouraging a suicidal person to live comes from talking about those feelings. Doing so can be the first step in helping them to choose to live.

**MYTH:** Attempted or completed suicides happen without warning.

**FACT:** Out of 10 people who kill themselves, eight have given definite clues to their intentions. They leave numerous clues and warnings to others, although some of their clues may be nonverbal or difficult to detect. These warning signs include:

- Previous suicide attempt(s)
- Family history of suicide
- Job or financial loss
- Loss of relationship(s)
- Easy access to lethal means
- Local clusters of suicide
- Lack of social support and sense of isolation
- Stigma associated with asking for help
- Lack of healthcare, especially mental health and substance abuse treatment
- Exposure to others who have died by suicide (in real life or via the media and Internet)
- Mental disorders, particularly mood disorders, schizophrenia, anxiety disorders, and certain personality disorders
- Alcohol and other substance use disorders
- Hopelessness
- Impulsive and/or aggressive tendencies
- History of trauma or abuse
- Major physical illnesses
MYTH: Once a person is suicidal, they will be suicidal forever.

FACT: Most people who are considering suicide will only be that way for a limited period of their lives. Thoughts of suicide are mostly temporary and given proper assistance and support for their mental health issues, they will probably recover and continue to lead meaningful and happy lives unhindered by suicidal concerns.

MYTH: Suicidal young people cannot help themselves.

FACT: While contemplating suicide, young people may have a distorted perception of their actual life situation and what solutions are appropriate for them to take. However, with support and constructive assistance from caring and informed people around them, young people can gain full self-direction and self-management in their lives.

MYTH: Once someone has already decided on suicide, nothing is going to stop them. Suicidal people clearly want to die.

FACT: Most of the time, a suicidal person is ambivalent about the decision; they are torn between wanting to die and wanting to live. Most suicidal individuals don’t want death; they just want the pain to stop. Some people, seeing evidence of two conflicting feelings in the individual may interpret the action as insincerity: “He really doesn’t want to do it; I don’t think he is serious.” People’s ability to help is hindered if they don’t understand the common suicidal characteristic of ambivalence.

MYTH: Depression affects ________ people only.

FACT: Depression is an “equal opportunity illness” that can affect anyone, regardless of race or socioeconomic level. Kids as young as 8 or 9 can get severely depressed and depression is epidemic among teens today. Kids don’t have to be clinically depressed to have suicidal feelings or to attempt suicide. Even feeling extremely “bummed out” for a relatively short period of time can lead to impulsive suicide attempts. Nevertheless, a person who is clinically depressed for longer periods of time is at higher risk for attempting suicide.

MYTH: Depression causes all suicides.

FACT: Depression and suicide are not synonymous. Millions of Americans are depressed yet a small fraction of them take their lives. Other diagnoses are relevant to complete suicides — schizophrenia, psychotic disorders, substance abuse, or anxiety disorders. It’s not just about depression.

MYTH: Telling someone to cheer up usually helps.

FACT: Trying to cheer someone up might make them feel even more misunderstood and ashamed of their thoughts and feelings. It’s important to listen well and take them seriously.