Suicide and mental illness

Summary

- Suicide is a leading cause of death for people seriously affected by 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.

Around 2,400 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, bipolar disorder or other forms of mental illness. For every person who dies from suicide, it is thought at least another 20 people attempt to take their lives.

Suicide is a leading cause of death for people seriously affected by 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.

Risk factors for suicide

Contributing factors to suicide may include:

- **Depression** – many people who suicide have experienced depression. Other forms of mental illness also have higher rates of self-harm and suicide.
- **Psychosis** – some people suicide because they are distressed and 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 are suicidal 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 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, including:

- 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)
- Need Help? Chat live with a **SANE Helpline Advisor** (Available Monday-Friday, 10am-10pm AEST).
- **SANE Forums** are full of people who want to talk to you and offer support.
- Your **GP (Doctor)**
- **Lifeline** Tel. 13 11 14
- **Kids Help Line** Tel. 1800 551 800

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