

Understanding Risk For Teens, Elderly, and Military Veterans

While the overall rate of suicide is highest for ages 45-64, we see spikes in the number of suicides within certain groups. Teens, the elderly, and military veterans have disproportionately high rates of suicide (MHA, n.d.) (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.). Understanding some of the special issues that these groups face can help keep you alert for problems. Keep the following cautions in mind, along with general warning signs and risk factors.

Elderly

May be at greater risk because:

- **Increased loss and loneliness:** Many of the changes that come with aging involve loss. Seniors may face retirement, death of loved ones, and loss of independence. Many elders find themselves more and more cut off from support and emotional connection. Without help, loneliness and sadness can contribute to thoughts of suicide.
- **Losing sense of future and purpose:** The feeling that one is no longer useful and the days are numbered can develop into depression.
- **Struggling with illness and pain:** Chronic pain, health issues, and fear of conditions, such as Alzheimer's, can spark depression. Depression may also be a side-effect of medication. Seniors may also be less likely to admit that they have mental health problems or to seek help.
- **Signs of depression may be misread:** Depression can make older adults confused or forgetful, which can be misdiagnosed as a memory loss problem or dementia. Pulling away from others and loss of joy may be wrongly thought of as normal in an elderly person.

What you can do:

Don't assume that being sad is a normal part of getting older – it's not. Try to have conversations that touch on emotions and feelings. Encourage activity and socializing. Watch for stockpiling of pills or interest in getting access to a gun. Share any concerns with your elder's doctor.

Men, depression, and suicide

Many men experience depression, but how that looks may be different from what you might expect to see.

While both men and women feel the hopelessness of depression, women tend to express it as extreme sadness while men may appear angry and irritable. You might be more likely to see risky behavior such as reckless driving. Men also tend to escape into work or sports even though these activities have lost meaning.

Men may have more physical symptoms, such as headaches, stomach problems, and unexplained pain. These symptoms may not match our expectations of what a depressed person looks like.

In addition, men tend to be more likely to think of depression as a weakness. They may be less likely to seek help. Instead, they may pull away from others and use drugs or alcohol. These unhealthy coping behaviors can increase the risk of suicide.

Source: Mayo Clinic Staff, 2024

Teens

May be at greater risk because:

- **Face more potential triggers:** Teens are going through many emotional, mental and social changes. At the same time, they face a high need to fit in. The stress of school/classes, bullying, gender identity concerns, or body image issues could be a trigger. Failing a test or a romantic breakup could be a tipping point.
- **More reactive to triggers and act more impulsively:** Compared to adults, who typically do more planning, teens are quicker to act when stressed. This can add to the risk when faced with more potential triggers.
- **Vulnerable to imitation:** Teens are more susceptible to suicide “contagion” as compared to adults (attempting suicide after learning of a suicide). Risk exists even if the teen didn’t personally know the person who committed suicide. In the intense aftermath of a suicide, they may interpret the action as an acceptable or heroic way to deal with distress (CDC, 2024).
- **Warning signs may not be as clear:** It’s normal for teens to go through emotional ups and downs. It may be more difficult to spot moods or behaviors that point to suicide. Poor grades, explosive anger, acting out sexually, or even boredom may actually be signs of depression. Warning signs of suicide may include running away from home or doing risky things, such as driving while drunk or abusing drugs.

What you can do:

Keep lines of communication open. Watch for changes. Trust your instincts. Seek help from a professional (such as your doctor or a therapist) who can assess and treat your teen. Your EAP can offer guidance and information on resources in your area.

Military veterans

May be at greater risk because:

- **Adjustment issues:** Getting used to civilian life after deployment can be extremely difficult, even if the person was not in combat. Along with adjusting to a different pace and focus, returning military must re-establish roles and relationships. They must find work and cope with any emotional and physical injuries. It can be overwhelming.
- **At risk for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD):** The experiences, emotions and impact of deployment can cause ongoing mental stress. For some, this results in a diagnosis of PTSD and a higher risk of suicide as a result.

What you can do:

Returning from deployment is a process, not an event. Give returning vets plenty of time to readjust to civilian life. Watch for unusual focus on weapons or other aspects of their military role, such as wearing their uniform or part it, such as boots. Be alert for obsession with war news, visits to graveyards, or overprotectiveness.

Use professional help as needed and any special support offered to veterans and their families – such as the confidential Veteran’s Crisis Line operated by the VA:

- **Dial 988** and **press 1** to talk to someone.
- Text message to **838255** to connect with a VA responder.
- Visit veteranscrisisline.net/support/be-there

References

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Risk Factors and Warning Signs

Suicide is a devastating act that can seem to have come from nowhere. But sometimes people give clues that they're thinking of suicide. It can be helpful to understand why a person might be at risk and learn to recognize signs that could warn of a suicide attempt.

Risk factors

Could make a suicide more likely.

Depression or other mental health illness

If several of the following conditions occur nearly every day for two weeks or more, it could indicate depression.

- Feeling hopeless, helpless, worthless, sad
- Loss of interest in life and things that would normally be enjoyable
- Changes in eating, sleeping patterns
- Tiredness, low energy
- Feeling anxious, irritable, restless
- Physical pain without a physical cause
- Drop in performance at work or school
- Trouble focusing or making decisions
- Not wanting to be around other people
- Thoughts of death or suicide

Other risk factors

- Alcohol and drug use
- A previous suicide attempt
- A family history of depression, suicide, abuse
- A major loss – a death, relationship, home
- An event that causes shame, guilt, disgrace
- Physical health problems
- Learning of someone else's suicidal behavior
- Easy access to the means to commit suicide
- Being impulsive or isolated

Warning signs

May indicate that an attempt is close.

- Direct threats to hurt or kill oneself
- Looking for a way to commit suicide – buying a gun or stockpiling pills, for example
- A focus on death – talking, writing, drawing or posting online about death or suicide, listening to music related to death, looking at websites that discuss suicide
- Having a plan for an attempt; generally, the more detailed the plan, the higher the risk
- Behaviors and moods associated with depression as described
- A change in personality or mood – including suddenly becoming very happy after being sad
- Neglect of appearance or cleanliness
- Doing risky or self-destructive things
- Giving away meaningful belongings
- Taking care of end-of-life affairs, such as making a will, or getting life insurance in order
- Saying goodbye to friends and loved ones

Take immediate action to get help

if a person appears intoxicated, has risk factors for suicide, and/or has made a direct threat to hurt or kill themselves.