

A LINE ON LIFE

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Looking for Hope *

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On the eve of a New Year, most people are looking hopefully for a new start. However, some people have given up hoping and become depressed. They may also be lonely, in ill health, or have problems with their marriage, job or finances. These problems can lead to **suicide**. There are about 25,000 known suicides in the United States each year. Other deaths — single car crashes, drug overdoses — may be listed as accidental to avoid the stigma of suicide. Therefore actual suicides probably total about 50,000. Failed suicide attempts are estimated to be two to eight times this number.



Women attempt suicide three times more often than men, but men kill themselves more than women. The greater number of attempts by women is probably related to a higher incidence of depression. More men die, because they use more lethal methods — typically guns. Women were more likely to use drugs or slash their wrists. Suicide attempts end in death 80% of the time when guns are used but only 10% of the time with drugs, because drugs take effect slowly. Unfortunately, with more women owning guns, this method has recently become their first choice for suicide.

The greatest number of suicides is among people in their 50s, and rates remain high as people grow older. However, in the last several decades, the suicide rate for young people (15-24) has almost tripled. Each year, about 250,000 attempt suicide, and over 50,000 die.

In this age group, college students are twice as likely to kill themselves than nonstudents of the same age. Increased suicide rates among college students are found in other countries beside the United States. Causes for the despair that leads them to suicide include —

- Living away from home for the first time and having to cope with new problems.
- Trying to maintain top grades against competition that is tougher than high school.
- Loneliness caused by loss of previous social support and anxiety about making new friends.

On average, suicidal college students have high academic records. In contrast, suicidal adolescents have exceptionally poor high school records. They are typically behavior problems in school or dropouts. Their most outstanding trait is social isolation. With their dysfunctional families, when these teenagers attempted suicide, 25% were not living at home.

Another related factor is drug abuse. In a 1988 study of 283 suicides, 60% were drug abusers. If alcohol was added to the list, this included 84%. However, it is not clear whether the drugs were a causal factor or an unsuccessful self-treatment for another problem.

**Most of those who threaten suicide
do not want to die.**

A few people see no other solution for their unbearable distress than death. However, the great majority does not want to die. They want express the extent of their despair, hoping that their suicide attempt will change the behavior of others. It is their "*cry for help*." Too often, their cries are ignored, and life ends.

If you become aware of someone's suicidal tendencies — even if you are not a trained professional — you can keep them from committing suicide.

- **Ask them if they intend to commit suicide.** (Discussing suicide will not put the idea into their mind. This is a myth.) If you can discover their suicide plan, the it can be aborted by removing the method. (At the Golden Gate Bridge, a policeman threatened a potential jumper, "*Come down or I'll shoot!*" Wanting to die only by his method, the jumper meekly climbed back to the street level.) However, you don't need to threaten to shoot. For example, if the plan involves crashing a favored car, taking the car keys can abort the suicide attempt.
- **Listen to their problems with empathy.** Just having someone close to them who will listen to their problems can provide the social support that the person needs. Try to see the world through their eyes — to understand why they are considering suicide. Empathetic listening means withholding any judgment or advice. Giving advice ("*Things aren't as bad as they seem.*") is not helpful.
- **Make an appointment.** If they promise to meet you at a specified time and place, this can help in two ways. First — even when considering suicide — many people are unwilling to break their promises. This can delay the suicide attempt. Second, during that period, the situation may change, offering some positive options rather than suicide.
- **Get them professional help.** You can give them information about professional sources of help, but it is even better if you accompany them to contact someone.

Even if these hints do not work, you will have done your best. Nobody can do better than that. If you have been affected by a suicide, this quote may be helpful.

"... we cannot solve the problems of others, nor can we make decisions for them. We can only respect and care for them, offering ourselves as a calm, stable fellow traveler who reaches out to their own core of stability. Given this much, they will do the rest, usually (though not always) choosing life."

As scary as it is, you can reach out to those who threaten suicide and give them some hope.

* Adapted from Atkinson, Atkinson, Smith & Bem, *Introduction to Psychology*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1990, pages 610-611.