

Connected to Life, Connected to Hope

People give many reasons for wanting to take their own lives. The bottom line, however, is that someone will commit suicide when they have lost all hope that things will get better - when they are convinced death is the best possible option and the only chance they have of relieving their pain. This is an incredibly lonely place to be. Supportive connections to other people - to society as a whole, to groups, and to individuals - is a buffer that helps protect us from slipping into the ultimate hopelessness and loneliness that leads to suicide.

Consider the following:

- A 75 year Harvard study has demonstrated, **“Good relationships keep us happier and healthier, period.”**
- Another study in Alameda County, California begun back in 1965 concluded, **“People who were disconnected from others were roughly three times more likely to die during the nine year study than people with strong social ties.”**
- Other research shows that there is a positive **correlation between more time spent on social media and higher rates of unhappiness and loneliness.** On the flip side, there is a positive correlation between more time spent with others in person and greater happiness.

Although there may often be other interventions needed to help someone overcome hopelessness and to guard against suicide, being in healthy relationships with others is a key protective factor.

How does connection with others help?

- Close relationships with others helps put problems into perspective. **When we are connected to others, our problems are not as threatening, not as big.** A burden shared is a burden lightened.
- People who are contemplating acting on suicidal thoughts often will not reach out to others for support. **Having close ties to others ensures a greater chance that others will be reaching out to the person who is feeling suicidal.** This can alert loved ones and friends when professional intervention may be needed. Friends and family members who are actively involved in the lives of someone who is depressed are known as gatekeepers. They are often the first ones to become aware that an individual is at risk and they frequently have the first opportunity to get them help.
- **Close, positive interactions with others can help to ward off feelings of loneliness.** Close relationship with our families, especially when established early in life, can produce a greater sense of self-esteem and of self-worth.
- **Strong involvement in our communities can bring with it a greater understanding of purpose and meaning in life.** It can provide opportunities for meaningful achievement, which in turn gives us a healthy view of ourselves.
- **Overall, socially connected people achieve greater fulfillment of basic human needs such as a sense of belonging, a feeling of accomplishment, and the need for safety and security.**

So, how can you be there to provide helpful social support to someone who is depressed or who may be suicidal?

- **Show up.** Even if you feel your presence isn't wanted, just being present with someone who is depressed sends a message, "You are worth it and you are important to me."
- **Don't try to cheer someone up when they are depressed.** This serves to reinforce the depressed individual's idea that no one understands and further cements them in feelings of loneliness. Instead, acknowledge how painful or overwhelming life is for them.
- **Be direct.** Although it feels shocking and uncomfortable, rather than avoid the subject of suicide, it is better to come right out and ask, "Are you thinking about killing yourself?" It may feel like you will hurt your loved one's feelings but this is very rarely the case. And, you cannot increase a person's risk of suicide by "planting" the idea in their head.
- **Take it seriously.** When someone mentions wanting to die or thinking about taking their own life, get assistance. Try to get someone on the phone that can help (the person's doctor or therapist or someone at a suicide hotline) or see if your friend would be willing to go to the hospital. If necessary, call 911 and request a crisis intervention team to come and handle the situation.
- **Offer practical help when you can.** Help them get to an appointment. Offer to help them find resources. Offer to help them with tasks that seem overwhelming such as walking their dog or mowing the lawn. Many times the things you would do for someone who is grieving a death are the exact things that mean the world to someone who is depressed and weary.
- **Practice self-care and set boundaries.** It is not okay for your loved one, regardless of how emotionally fragile they are, to be abusive to you in any way. Let them know that you are aware of their pain but also that they cannot call you names, cuss you out, or physically harm you. It is also not okay for your friend to expect you to be available at the drop of a hat 24/7. Explain to them clearly that you physically can't be available to them 24/7 but you do want to be available to support them. Tell them clearly when you are available.

Finally, believe in the possibility of change. Even when you feel that all options have been exhausted, keep believing with the hopeless person that there is the hope of hope. If you continue to believe this, it makes it easier for them to believe it. Then start over at square one and just show up.

Resources:

Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide: www.sptsusa.org
To Write Love On Her Arms: www.twloha.com
Crisis Text Line: Text START to 741741 from anywhere in the USA, at any time, about any type of crisis
The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255
The Trevor Project: 1-866-488-7386 (Support to LGBTQ youth)
Suicide Prevention Resource Center: www.sprc.org (Provides information on suicide prevention for people of all ages, including senior citizens.)