

About this factsheet

This is one in a series of factsheets for parents, teachers and young people entitled *Mental Health and Growing Up*. The aims of these factsheets are to provide practical, up-to-date information about mental health problems (emotional, behavioural and psychiatric disorders) that can affect children and young people. This factsheet looks at the reasons behind why people try to kill themselves, and offers advice about what to do to help someone who you feel might be at risk of attempting suicide.

Introduction

Why do people try to kill themselves?

Nearly everyone has times when they feel sad and lonely. Sometimes, it can feel as if no one really likes us, that we are a failure, that we just upset people and that no one would care if we were dead. We may feel angry but unable to say so, or feel hopeless about the future.

It is feelings like these that make some young people try to kill themselves. Often, several upsetting things have happened over a short time and one more upset or rejection is the 'last straw'. An argument with parents is a common example; another is breaking up with a friend, or being in trouble. Teenagers who try to kill themselves are often trying to cope independently with very upset feelings, or difficult problems for the first time. They don't know how to solve their problems, or lack the support they need to cope with a big upset. They feel overwhelmed and see no other way out.

Often, the decision to attempt suicide is made quickly without thinking. At the time, many people just want their problems to disappear, and have no idea how to get help. They feel as if the only way out is to kill themselves.

The risk of suicide is higher when a young person:

- is depressed, or when they have a serious mental illness – if they get the help and treatment they need, the risk can be greatly reduced
- is using drugs or alcohol when they are upset
- has tried to kill themselves a number of times or has planned for a while about how to die without being saved
- has a relative or friend who tried to kill themselves.

Is this just attention-seeking?

No. Attempted suicide should always be taken seriously. The young person needs someone to understand what they have been feeling, although they might find it hard to put into words. They need someone to listen, and who is prepared to help.

Who is most at risk?

- There has been an increase in the suicide rate in young men over recent years.
- Many young people who try to kill themselves have mental health and personality problems.
- Suicide attempts in young people nearly always follows a stressful event – usually relationship problems. However, sometimes the young person will have shown no previous signs of mental health problems.
- Sometimes, the young person has had serious problems (e.g. with the police, their family or school) for a long time. These are the young people who are most at risk of further attempts. Some will already be seeing a counsellor, psychiatrist or social worker. Others have refused normal forms of help, and appear to be trying to run away from their problems.
- Young people who are misusing drugs or alcohol have the highest risk of death by suicide.

Sources of further information

- The Samaritans provide a 24-hour service offering confidential emotional support to anyone who is in crisis. Helpline 08457 909090 (UK); 1850 609090 (ROI); e-mail: jo@samaritans.org; www.samaritans.org.uk
- YoungMinds provides information and advice on child mental health issues: 102–108 Clerkenwell Road, London EC1M 5SA; Parents' Information Service 0800 018 2188; www.youngminds.org.uk
- A CD-ROM designed for 13–17 year-olds on mental health which looks at depression and self-harm: *Changing Minds: A Multimedia CD-ROM about Mental Health*. Further details from the Royal College of Psychiatrists: tel: 020 7235 2351, ext: 146; www.rcpsych.ac.uk/publications/auvidetv/colidscd/index.htm

Or you may like to look at these websites:

www.lifesigns.ukf.net
www.nshn.co.uk
www.selfharmalliance.org
www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

- The *Mental Health and Growing Up* series contains 36 factsheets on a range of common mental health problems. To order the pack, contact Book Sales at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17, Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG; tel: 020 7235 2351, ext: 146; fax: 020 7245 1231; e-mail: booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk, or you can download them from www.rcpsych.ac.uk

How can I help?

- Notice when your child seems upset, withdrawn or irritable.
- Encourage them to talk about their worries. Show them you care by listening, and helping them to find their own solutions to problems.
- Buy blister packs of medicine in small amounts. This helps prevent impulsive suicides after a row or upset. Getting pills out of a blister pack takes longer than swallowing them straight from a bottle. It may be long enough to make someone stop and think about what they are doing.
- Keep medicines locked away.
- Get help if family problems or arguments keep upsetting you and your child.

For parents, it's hard to cope with a child attempting suicide and it's natural to feel angry, frightened or guilty. It may also be hard to take it seriously or know what to do for the best.

Specialist help

Everyone who has tried to kill themselves, or taken an overdose, needs an urgent assessment by a doctor as soon as possible even if they look OK. The harmful effects can sometimes be delayed. Even small amounts of some medication can be fatal. Poisoning with paracetamol is the most common type of overdose in Britain. Overdosing

with paracetamol causes serious liver damage, and each year this leads to many deaths. Even a small number of tablets can be fatal.

All young people who attempt suicide or harm themselves should have a specialist mental health assessment before leaving the hospital. The aim is to discover the causes of the problem. It is usual for parents or carers to be involved in treatment. This makes it easier to understand the background to what has happened, and to work out together whether help is needed.

A lot of young people make another attempt if they do not receive the help they need. Usually, treatment will involve individual or family work for a small number of sessions. A very small number of young people who try to kill themselves really do still want to die. Often, they are suffering from depression or another treatable mental health problem. They may need specialist help over a longer period of time.

References

- Carroll, A. (2000) *What Works with Children and Adolescents? A Critical Review of Psychological Interventions with Children, Adolescents and Young People*. London: Brunner-Routledge.
- Goodman, M. & Taylor, E. (eds) (2002) *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (3rd Edn). London: Blackwell.
- Scott, A., Shaw, M. & Joughin, L. (eds) (2001) *Ending the Evidence: A Gateway to the Literature in Child and Adolescent Mental Health* (2nd edn). London: Cassell.