It's Time to Talk about it

A Family Guide for Youth Suicide Prevention

The Importance of Families

"For a long time, Sharon and I had seen Garrett [our son] struggle with dyslexia, poor self-worth, and descend into dark and dangerous depressions. Recently he'd confessed to us that the thought of suicide had entered his mind, and now that he'd done it, I blame myself. How had it come to this? Why hadn't I been there more for my son?... I now fully realized that Garrett was mentally or emotionally ill – I didn't know which, or the difference. Nor did I know how to help."

Senator Gordon Smith
Excerpt taken from "Remembering Garrett: One Family's Battle with a Child's Depression"

Stories like this are shared by families each and every day. Yet, it seems like we don't often hear about "youth suicide" as being a problem, *but it is*. Each day in our country, approximately 12 young people will end their lives prematurely. For families and the community, losing a loved one to suicide can be devastating.

How can *we*, as families, prevent suicide among our youth? What are the warning signs and risk factors to look out for? Where do *we* go for help and support? How can *we* become more involved in promoting mental wellness within our communities?

The purpose of this guide is to help you – family members – become aware of how to recognize the warning signs and risk factors of suicide so that you will be able to identify these signs in youth who you may encounter in everyday activities. Oftentimes, people do not know what to do or where to go to get help and support when faced with concerns that something may be "wrong". This guide will give you the information you need to find help for youth in your community. It will also provide you with information to increase your awareness in how you can play an important role in promoting suicide prevention efforts. Such roles include:

Awareness & Education: Becoming aware of the warning signs and risk factors of suicide and knowing how you can help an at risk youth.

Support: Becoming a mentor and a supportive network for other families in the community.

Partnership: Becoming a partner with community agencies and schools in making decisions about programs and services offered to at risk youth.

Advocacy: Becoming an advocate in your community by helping to plan and promote programs, services, or activities that assist with suicide awareness and prevention efforts.

This guide has been developed with the help of families like you – families who understand your needs and concerns. The steps we provide in this guide have been developed to give you guidance, support, courage and hope.

Let's begin a journey toward promoting emotionally healthy youth in our community. Suicide is preventable...everyone can help!

"Suicide is real...it's happening. We can't be in denial any longer...we need to start talking about it!"

Parent and Suicide Survivor

Youth Suicide, Troubling Numbers

"Teen suicide in my family...something like that would never happen. Boy, was I wrong...it did happen. If I only knew then what I know today..."

Kathy Sumrow
Parent, Suicide Survivor & Chapter Chair of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (Florida First Coast)

Youth suicide is a growing problem that affects families every day in our country. It is the third leading cause of death among youth between the ages of 10-24 years old. Although the highest rates of suicide are among white males, suicide does not discriminate. It can affect anyone regardless of age, gender, race, income, and family background.

In one year alone, we lose approximately 4,400 youth to suicide. Although this is a startling number, what is even more concerning is what we do not know. Research reports that for every 1 suicide there are approximately 100-200 suicide attempts. In addition, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, each year approximately 149,000 youth between the ages of 10-24 receive emergency medical care services for self-inflicted wounds.

To paint an even clearer picture of the scope of this problem, in a recent, 2009 nationwide survey of high school students, approximately,

13.8% of youth seriously considered attempting suicide,
10.9% had a plan, and
6.3% attempted suicide.

Although these numbers are quite alarming, the good news is that youth suicide is preventable.

Let's take the first step towards identifying and understanding the warning signs and risk factors of suicide.

Getting Started, Taking the First Step

How do I know when a youth is at risk?

Recognizing and Understanding the Warning Signs and Risk Factors of Suicide

"He didn't like crowds...more and more, he sought solitude...he was drinking each morning to calm himself for the school day, then more at bedtime to help him go to sleep. He had been self-medicating for some time, going to elaborate lengths to hide it from us...now [we know that] he was crying out for help."

Senator Gordon Smith
Excerpt taken from "Remembering Garrett: One Family's Battle with a Child's Depression"

It's quite common for youth to go through the ups and downs of adolescence. This is normal. So, how do we determine if a youth is "crying out for help?" How do we know what *is* normal and what *is not* normal? What do we need to look out for?

Research shows that there are some key warning signs to be aware of. Warning signs are similar to "clues" or "red flags." Some warning signs may be easier to detect, such as when a youth may express wishes to die. Other signs are harder to uncover – in these cases, emotions and feelings may be locked inside, hidden from family or friends. What's important to keep in mind is that you are looking for drastic changes in behavior and mood over a relatively short period of time. Let's take a look at some of these signs.

Watch out for drastic changes in behaviors. Monitor changes, ask questions.

"Every teenager goes through rough times...if problems linger or if you just have a gut feeling that something is wrong, check into it and get help. Don't ignore it and think that it's just part of being a teenager."

Parent and Suicide Survivor

Take all warning signs seriously.

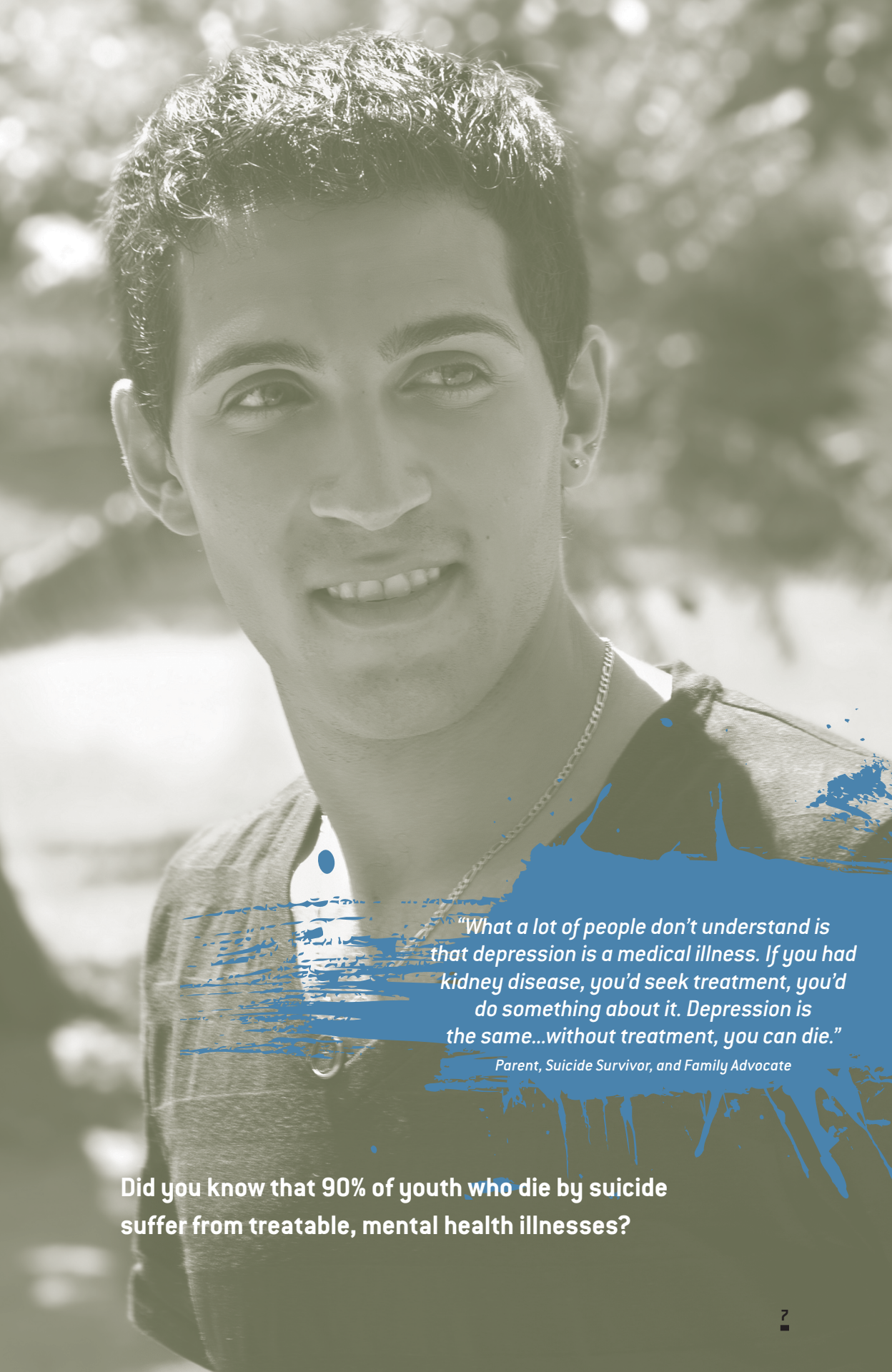
IF YOU FEEL SOMEONE IS IN IMMEDIATE DANGER,

CALL 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

This is a confidential phone line that is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Never leave a potentially suicidal youth alone. Stay with the youth until help arrives.

A Quick Tip:

One way to monitor a youth's behavior is to listen to how they talk to their peers. Watch what they may be saying on online networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter. If you suspect that something is wrong, talk to the youth. Don't be afraid to ask questions. You could save a life!



"What a lot of people don't understand is that depression is a medical illness. If you had kidney disease, you'd seek treatment, you'd do something about it. Depression is the same...without treatment, you can die."

Parent, Suicide Survivor, and Family Advocate

Did you know that 90% of youth who die by suicide suffer from treatable, mental health illnesses?

Quick Fact:

Youth who attempt suicide are 18 times more likely to try it again. What's even more startling is that these youth are 40 times more likely to die by suicide in the future.

There are some other clues that can help determine if a youth is at risk for suicide. These clues are known as "risk factors." While warning signs are more immediate changes in behavior, risk factors are often more stable traits that increase the likelihood of future suicide.

One risk factor that people are most commonly aware of is depression.

Some important risk factors include :

- Previous suicide attempts
- History of substance abuse
- History of mental illness (e.g., depression, anxiety, bipolar, PTSD)
- Relationship problems (e.g., conflict with parents and/or boy/girlfriends)
- Legal or disciplinary problems
- Access to a gun or other harmful means (e.g., pills)
- Recent death of a family member or a close friend
- Ongoing exposure to bullying
- Losing a friend or family member to suicide
- Physical illness or disability

By becoming aware and knowledgeable of these warning signs and risk factors, you can be the first line of defense in preventing youth suicide.

Taking the Next Step, Providing Support & Getting Help

What do I do if I'm concerned about a youth?

Now that you're aware of some of the warning signs to look for – here are a few steps for you to take if you feel a youth is in danger of harming him or herself.

1. Approach the youth who you are concerned about. Let him or her know that you are concerned and want to help. Give the youth a chance to "talk".

A special note to parents. *It's common for parents to face unique challenges with their children. Relationships may be strained, conflicts may exist, and open lines of communication may be broken. It's also quite common for children to avoid their parents – to isolate them from their life and their problems. Your child may not always want to turn to you for help. Despite these barriers, please don't give up!*

- *Be persistent. Continue to try to talk to your child to find out what is bothering him or her.*
- *Reinforce the message that you care. Let your child know that you are concerned and are there to help.*
- *Try to connect with your child in the best way that you can even if this means involving other family members or friends who can help.*
- *Give your child hope that there is a solution to his or her problems.* ***Hope can help to prevent suicide.***

Tips for starting a conversation with a youth:

- "I'm really worried about you. Can we talk?"
- "I've been noticing that you are (sad; distant; not yourself lately). I'm really concerned. Can we talk about what's been bothering you?"
- "You haven't been acting like yourself lately. Let's talk about what's going on."

Things to consider when a youth shares his/her feelings:

- Try not to be judgmental or critical
- Be patient and listen
- Try not to react by being shocked, angry, or disappointed
- Don't give advice
- Try not to minimize how a youth may be feeling

Helpful Tip:

Youth often share their problems with each other. Encourage them to talk to their friends and report back to a trusted adult if they feel that something is wrong. Friends can help friends prevent suicide as a option.

2. Don't be afraid to ask direct questions about suicide. Talking about suicide does not cause suicide. In fact, by asking questions, you may prevent suicide by showing the youth that you care and are there to help. Asking direct questions can also help you to determine if the youth is in immediate danger and in need of assistance.

Here are some ways to ask a youth if they are considering suicide:

- Are you feeling so bad that you're thinking about harming yourself?
- Have you been feeling like you want to escape from it all?
- Do you ever wish you were dead?
- Do you ever wish you could go to sleep and never wake up?

3. What's also important to keep in mind is that you should NEVER promise to keep thoughts or feelings about suicide a "secret." Keeping the secret may be extremely harmful, if not fatal. Be sure to tell the youth that you are unable to keep their secret. Even if they seem upset with you now, they will thank you later.

4. If you feel that the youth is not in immediate danger but still needs help:

- Tell the youth that they are not alone. Let them know that you are there to support and help in any and every way that you can.
- Let the youth know that help is available. Encourage them to talk to their parent(s), a school counselor or teacher, a trusted adult, or a mental health professional (e.g., therapist, social worker, or psychologist).
- Review the listing of community resources in the back of this guide with the youth and/or family. If needed, accompany the youth to get help. This step will help to ensure that the youth gets connected to services.
- Become part of the youth's ongoing support system. Check in with the youth frequently to see how they are doing and to remind them that you care.

5. If you suspect that a youth is in imminent danger, get help IMMEDIATELY. Do not wait until things "blow over" or calm down.

- Call **1-800-273-TALK (8255)** or take the youth to an emergency room or walk in clinic.
- Never leave the youth alone – wait with the youth until help arrives.

Show youth that you care. Let youth know that they are not alone. Be willing to listen. Assist youth in getting help and staying connected to services.

Quick Fact:

Question: *Where can I get help? Where do I start?*
Answer: You can first start by talking to a family doctor or a trusted adult at the youth's school or local church. These professionals can help you find trained, mental health counselors or therapists in your community.

Staying Involved, Ways to Promote Resiliency

How can I play a role in promoting emotional well-being among youth?

There are many moments in a young person's life when you can make a positive impact. One way to do this is through mentoring. By becoming a mentor or role model, you can help to build confidence, self-worth, and promote positive social attitudes and relationships. Within this role, you are also becoming part of the youth's social support system. You will have the opportunity to provide guidance, encouragement, and support. You will also be able to promote resiliency and play an important role in helping youth to become emotionally healthy!

When you socialize with youth in your community:

- Listen to them. Let them know that you care and are there for them if they need someone to talk to.
- Encourage a youth who is stressed to take a break and try to relax: write in a journal, take a walk or go for a run, bake cookies, or shoot some hoops.
- Focus on strengths and skills. Persuade youth to engage in activities they enjoy.
- Encourage youth to get connected with peers at school or in the community.
- Motivate youth to set goals and follow their dreams.
- Promote healthy behaviors such as eating nutritional meals and exercising.
- Encourage youth to develop other supportive relationships with teachers, coaches, clergy (e.g., pastor, rabbi, or imam), siblings, or older teens. A good support network can help a youth to feel connected.

> *"Would you ever let your child drive without ever giving them driving lessons?...Our kids also need tools to have a healthy life...an emotionally healthy life."*
>
> *Karen H.*
> *Parent, Suicide Survivor and Advocate*

In addition to being a mentor to a youth, it's also important to consider becoming a friend to other families. Regardless if you're a novice or expert in navigating through the mental health system, we can help one another to locate the services we need, to encourage each other to get involved in our youth's treatment, to form partnerships with mental health professionals, and to become involved in helping the community prevent youth suicide.

By becoming part of a youth's social support network, we can show them that we care and help them to see that life is worth living!

Working Together, Building a Partnership with Professionals

How do I build a partnership with a mental health provider and/or with a school?

Developing a positive and equal partnership with mental health providers and school staff is an essential step in promoting mental well-being among our youth. Getting input from the family about the youth's treatment is important because it helps professionals understand the youth's strengths, past successes, challenges and failures. Remember that all treatment goals and planning decisions should be mutually agreed upon. If your youth has experienced treatments or approaches that have worked in the past, please feel empowered to ask for them. "The family's voice" – our opinion – along with the expertise and knowledge of the professional is key in building a successful, working partnership. It's also important to include the youth's voice in the decision making process as this will enhance the youth's willingness to work with professionals.

Food for Thought:

- Keep in mind that when your child enters mental health treatment, the journey may be a long one – there is no quick fix or solution. Remain in treatment even if you feel that your child is getting better. Talk to the youth's physician or therapist to monitor how things are progressing.

- It's also important to know that there can be some occasions when you or your child may not connect with a physician or mental health therapist. That's okay. Simply, ask for a different doctor or therapist.

- Don't be afraid to get a second or third opinion. The more knowledge you have, the better equipped you will be in making the best decisions for your child and family.

"I see a lot of families who do not understand the importance of staying in treatment. If a child was on insulin or heart medication, a parent wouldn't dare stop treatment without first talking to their doctor. Parents also need to understand the importance of staying in mental health treatment and communicating with their child's therapist..."

Desiree Durham-DeLeon
Parent and Family Specialist

Here are some helpful ways for you to build a partnership with community professionals.

1. Ask Questions:

- "How can I be involved in my youth's treatment?"
- "What is the treatment plan?"
- "What are my youth's goals?"
- "Are there any mental health services provided in my youth's school?"
- Ask questions about anything that you do not understand

2. Research:

- Research your youth's treatment/diagnosis
- Research the mental health provider
- Write down information that professionals provide you with to help you remember
- For more information, go to your local library, search internet sites like www.NAMI.org and other resources. Refer to the resource section in the back of this guide for more information

3. Provide Social Support:

- Be involved in school activities
- Talk to your youth's teachers
- Encourage your youth to talk to you about what is going on in their life
- Be involved in your youth's treatment

"Unfortunately most people wait to become advocates until they experience a personal loss...don't wait until the loss happens...we can help to make a difference now."

Parent, Suicide Survivor and Advocate

Taking Another Step, Becoming an Advocate

How do I become more involved in suicide prevention efforts in my community?

As we all share one goal, one vision, together, we as families can become more involved in preventing youth suicide in our community. Through advocacy efforts, we can work together to strengthen families and communities, and more importantly, to help save young lives.

Regardless of how little or how much time you can offer, keep in mind that any level of involvement goes a long way in making a difference in the community. For some families, suicide prevention efforts may be more focused at the local level – in your neighborhoods, schools, and churches. For others, your efforts may be aimed at the state or national level. Some families may be able to engage in activities both within and outside of the community.

Here are some ways for you to become a suicide prevention advocate:

1. The good news is that by reading this guide you have already taken the first step toward becoming more knowledgeable about the risk factors and warning signs of suicide. Keep in mind that Knowledge is Power. Take what you've learned and educate others about youth suicide.

- Continue to educate yourself. Attend local suicide prevention trainings such as Question, Persuade, and Refer (QPR). Encourage family or friends to join you.
- Go online to stay informed of the latest news on suicide and prevention efforts (see the listing of suicide awareness websites in the Community Resource section).
- Try to engage others about this important topic. Share these resources.
- Become a mentor to other families who need support. Start your own support group. Share your experiences, learn from each other, and help each other to navigate through the mental health system.

2. Participate in a local suicide prevention group or chapter so that you can connect with others who have similar interests. Such groups offer valuable resources and ongoing support from other members.

- Find a local group to join such as the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) or National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). If you cannot find a local group or chapter, develop one on your own. Gather some of your family, work associates, and/or friends.
- Find an online support group, discussion forum, or blog.

3. Become a partner with mental health professionals, agencies, and schools. Building partnerships with community professionals is one way for us to communicate our needs and concerns, as well as to keep us involved in efforts to help our youth.

- Advocate for the "family voice" to be heard. Work with community professionals to help build strong communities that include the shared goals and perspectives of families.
    - Attend PTA meetings at schools if you can. Request to be involved in teacher and/or school conferences.
    - Talk to mental health professionals. Don't be afraid to ask questions.
- Advocate for suicide prevention education in the community. This can help reduce stigma associated with mental health problems and help-seeking behaviors.

Support and advocate for:

- Youth suicide prevention trainings (such as the Signs for Suicide (SOS) program) and mental health screening in school settings.
- Gatekeeper suicide prevention trainings (such as Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR)) at local mental health agencies/centers, doctor offices, schools, and other community agencies. Advocate for programs that also build on community efforts to promote resiliency and mental wellness.
- Physicians to conduct regular mental health screenings and checkups.

4. Let your voice be heard. Represent other families in the community by becoming involved with community-based networks and associations at the local level. At this level, you can play a role in helping to plan suicide prevention activities or programs in the community.

- Join an advisory board or task force that deals with mental health issues among our youth. This will allow you to be a part of the decision making process that affects our youth.
- Become a certified suicide prevention trainer. Work with others to conduct suicide prevention training and education in the community.
- Be part of local suicide prevention activities and events in the community. Encourage others to support your efforts.

5. Mobilize efforts beyond the local community. Join forces with other advocates to create change at state and national levels.

- Keep up with the latest policies or legislation that may affect access to and/or funding for mental health services and suicide prevention efforts.
  - Write, email, or telephone your legislators.
  - Provide testimonies before legislative committees.
- Participate in state events like Florida Suicide Prevention Day at the Capital or AFSP's Out of the Darkness walk. You can also represent your state and become an AFSP Suicide Prevention Field Advocate (see the listing of suicide awareness websites in the Community Resource section).
- Keep others informed of your efforts. Develop a website, create a blog, or send out emails to local community members. Letting others know about your efforts may help to empower others to get involved.

6. Stay connected with your community and the mission to prevent youth suicide.

- Advocate for mental health agencies, schools, health services, and others to continue to engage in ongoing suicide prevention programs and activities.
- Work with community agencies and others to secure funding for suicide prevention programs.

Let's now continue our journey toward promoting emotionally healthy youth in our community. Together we can prevent youth suicide, one child at a time...together, we will make a difference!

National Emergency and Crisis Services

If someone is in immediate danger of hurting him or herself:

- Take the person to a hospital Emergency Room to be evaluated by a health professional.

If the person refuses help:

- **Call 9-1-1** to have a police officer evaluate the person.

If the person is a danger to self or others, the officer can transport the person to a hospital where he or she will be held for up to 72 hours while further evaluations and treatment are conducted.

NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE™

1-800-273-TALK (8255)

suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Notes

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You may also consider contacting a family physician or other qualified health professional for assistance.

National Mental Health Services

The following are just a few places you can access listings for local mental health services in your area. Please call or visit their websites for details.

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA)
www.dbsalliance.org
1-800-826-3632

Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)
http://findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov

Mental Health America (MHA)
www.mentalhealthamerica.net
1-800-969-6642

Mental Health Services Locator
www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/databases

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
www.nami.org
1-800-950-NAMI (6264)

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org
1-800-273-TALK (8255)

The Trevor Lifeline
www.thetrevorproject.org
1-866-488-7386

Other Resources

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
www.afsp.org

American Association for Suicide Prevention
www.suicidology.org

Center for Disease Control & Prevention
www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/suicide

Healthy Place
www.healthyplace.com

Jed Foundation
www.jedfoundation.org

National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health
www.ffcmh.org

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)
www.nimh.nih.gov

Strength of US
www.strengthofus.org

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
www.samhsa.gov/prevention/suicide.aspx

Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE)
www.save.org

Suicide Prevention Action Network USA
www.spanusa.org

Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC)
www.sprc.org

For additional information,
please contact the Adolescent Suicide Prevention Project at
1-800-215-9486

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