Knowing the signs of suicide can help save a life

Depression, overwhelming sadness, feelings of hopelessness – these are all signs that someone may be contemplating suicide. However, withdrawing from friends, changing sleep patterns and refusing to participate in activities they once enjoyed, can also be a red flag that a friend, family member or neighbor is thinking about causing harm to themselves. Knowing these signs and others can literally mean the difference between life and death for someone you care about.

Suicide is not a topic many people like to discuss. It is tragic and complex, but the good news is that it is also preventable. “It’s OK to not be OK as long as we don’t stay that way,” said Andrea Smith, Director of Innovation and Community Engagement for Detroit Wayne Integrated Health Network or DWIHN.

Suicidal thoughts can impact people of any age. Teens may struggle with confidence and low self-esteem as they learn how to navigate the world around them. Adults may question their self-worth after seeing images of perfection splashed all over social media. Seniors could suffer from isolation and loneliness. Anyone could face a major life event, such as a divorce, illness or job loss, that plunges them into despair.

“We all feel sad, hurt and angry at times, but sometimes it just boils over,” she said. “It’s important to remember that suicide is permanent. The thoughts may be impulsive, but the act is irreversible.”

Talking to a professional therapist provides many benefits, said Smith. For starters, it’s an outlet, a safe place to express thoughts without fear of judgement. It can be a relief to know that you are not alone. Therapists can also offer referrals to support groups that can help with the healing process.

You can call DWIHN at (800) 241-4949 for an anonymous mental health screening. If you just need to talk or text someone, contact the Reach Us Detroit program at (313) 488-HOPE for a supportive listener.

Reaching out for help is one thing but bringing up the topic of suicide with a loved one or an acquaintance can be more complicated. However, it is time to speak up if you observe any of these signs of suicidal behavior:

- Constant negativity
- A change in routine
- Problems with alcohol or drugs
- Increase in risky behaviors
- Eating or sleeping more or less
- Statements about suicide
- Saying goodbye

Approaching someone can be as simple as checking in with them, letting them know that you care about them and are thinking about them. If they seem comfortable opening up to you, just listen. Be sure to use “I” statements instead of “you” statements, suggested Smith. Say, for example, “I feel better and have more clarity when I get a full eight hours of sleep” instead of “You need to get eight hours of sleep so you can gain more clarity.”

In addition to therapy, coping strategies like confiding in close friends, journaling, reading, joining a club, positive affirmations, mindfulness, deep breathing and exercising can help ward off negative thoughts that may potentially lead to suicide.

Parents need to be aware that children and teens pick up on their stresses, even if they have no control over the problem. Negative energy from adults in their lives can be palatable to a teen, who may not be able to put the problem into perspective. A parent panicking over an upcoming bill payment that they can’t make, for example, may prompt adults to ask for an extension or seek help from a community organization, but a teen may jump to worries about becoming homeless or not having enough food to eat while not having any power to change the situation.

Parents should also be aware that their words can have a lasting impact on their children and future ability to communicate with others. For this reason, Smith encourages them to be mindful of the way they talk to their children. If you notice that your child is upset, for example, avoid asking “What’s wrong with you?” and instead ask “What happened to make you feel this way?”

Learn More

DWIHN is the largest and most diverse Community Mental Health public safety net in the state of Michigan serving 75,000 people with mental illness, substance use, intellectual and developmental disabilities and children with serious emotional disturbance. DWIHN works with over 300 Service Provider Partners that help people struggling with behavioral health issues, addiction, autism, suicidal thoughts, anxiety, depression and much more. To learn more, please visit website, www.dwihn.org or download our mobile app, myDWIHN, available free from the Apple or Google Play store.