



## Substance Abuse and Suicide Deaths

The correlation between substance abuse and suicide has been clearly established. Deaths from substance abuse in America have increased drastically, and suicide has become one of the leading causes of death in the United States. Drug overdose deaths have increased more than 250% among men and more than 400% among women over the past two decades, and suicide now accounts for more than 40,000 deaths each year.

In 2014, the number of drug overdose deaths in the U.S. passed the number of suicides for the first time ever: 47,055 fatal overdoses, compared to 42,773 suicides.

Some people believe that a certain number of drug overdose deaths are really suicides. In a statement before a congressional committee recently, a Princeton University professor said that many of the 60,000 drug overdose deaths that occur each year in America are not just accidents, but forms of suicide.

Whether or not the cause of overdose death is suicide or an accidental death, suicide *is* a risk among people with certain mental health disorders—and many studies have shown that suicide is clearly linked with the disease of addiction.

If a friend, coworker, loved one, or anyone you know is abusing drugs or alcohol and struggling emotionally, you can be the one who gets that person the help he or she needs and possibly save his or her life. Studies have shown that people are more likely to feel less depressed, less overwhelmed, less suicidal, and more hopeful after talking with someone who listens to them without judgment.

## Suicide Warning Signs

It is important to know the warning signs that indicate someone is at risk for suicide, especially if the behavior is new or unusual, has increased recently, or is related to loss, substantial change, or a painful event. If someone you know is exhibiting any of the following behaviors, seek guidance and help by calling the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.

- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Overuse/abuse of prescription medications
- Acting agitated, anxious, and/or behaving recklessly
- Sleeping excessively or not enough
- Isolating themselves
- Exhibiting rage
- Speaking of being a burden to others
- Talking about being in unbearable pain
- Withdrawing from friends and family
- Relaying feelings of hopelessness
- Saying there is no reason to live
- Exhibiting extreme mood swings
- Talking about feeling trapped with no way out
- Searching for ways to kill themselves, like buying a gun or researching suicide methods online
- Talking about wanting to die

People who are at risk for suicide often believe that their situation is inescapable and that they are not in control of their lives. They feel that there is no way to stop the pain, and they cannot see any way out. They have difficulty thinking clearly and cannot make decisions. Usually they will be unable to sleep, eat, or work. If you know someone who is expressing these kinds of feelings and exhibiting these behaviors, it is important to get help for that person right away.

### **Providing Help**

Trying to help someone who is suicidal can be a frightening and difficult experience. Here are some recommendations that might help:

Immediate safety should always be the primary concern in a crisis situation. Take action by removing all means of suicide—like drugs, pills, or weapons.

Engage the person in conversation and don't be afraid to talk openly about suicide. There is often a fear that bringing up the topic will "put the idea" into the mind of the person who is at risk, but this is not the case.

If your friend begins to talk about suicide, don't be judgmental and don't try to debate whether suicide is right or wrong. Don't lecture on the value of life. Also, don't act shocked if he or she mentions suicide, because this would put distance between you and the person you are trying to help.

Do be as direct as possible and be willing to listen carefully. Let your friend express his or her feelings and accept those feelings. Be available and get involved. Show him or her that you are truly interested and want to provide support. Offer hope by pointing out that alternatives and resources are available, but don't just offer glib reassurance. Get help from suicide prevention agencies and professionals who specialize in crisis intervention.

If your friend or loved one is suffering from depression, or is hospitalized for an overdose, he or she should be evaluated for Substance Use Disorder. People with Substance Use Disorder should receive assessment for psychiatric illness and active and passive suicide thinking. Those who are in treatment for substance abuse need to be evaluated for suicide ideation, family history of depression and suicide—and if necessary receive aggressive treatment to prevent suicide.

If someone is texting, emailing, or posting on social media sites about wanting to die or to kill themselves, feeling trapped and hopeless, feeling like a burden to others, or seeking revenge, you can encourage him or her to call the Suicide Prevention Lifeline. You can also contact social media safety teams, who will reach out to connect the user with the help he or she needs. Call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) at any time for help if a friend, coworker, or loved one is struggling.