

Dr. Lisa Boesky, Clinical Psychologist and Author of *When to Worry: How to Tell if Your Teen Needs Help—and What to Do About It*

The following behaviors are important “warning signs” of teens who may be thinking about ending their lives:

- Makes statements about suicide, dying, or being “gone”
- Looks or sounds like feelings of depression are deepening
- Is curious, fascinated, or preoccupied with death
- Talks about feeling inadequate, hopeless, or guilty
- Gives away possessions of value
- Becomes withdrawn and isolated
- Exhibits abrupt personality change
- Drops out of usual routine
- Neglects hygiene
- Engages in self-destructive or risky behavior

You should become increasingly concerned with each additional warning sign you see, especially if your teen suffers from a mental health disorder, uses alcohol/drugs, recently experienced a major stressor, has a family who repeatedly argues, is disruptive or aggressive, has been arrested, or who is a perfectionist (all or none thinking). Teens who end their lives typically have a combination of risk factors AND warning signs.

Some statements that family and friends should be on the look out for include:

- I won’t be a problem for you much longer.
- I wish I were dead.
- You’d be better off without me.
- If a person did ____, would he or she die?
- You probably wish I would just die.
- It hurts so much, I just can’t go on.
- I want to go to sleep and never wake up.
- Life’s just not worth living.
- I wish I could disappear forever.
- Maybe if I died they would finally see how much they hurt me.
- Maybe, I should just kill myself—just joking

Suicidal teens may start asking numerous questions about what death or heaven would be like, or inquire whether suicide is a sin. They may write stories, poems, or songs about death, dying, or destruction; these themes might start appearing in artwork or random doodling. Some suicidal teens are obsessed with television shows that deal with murder, forensic investigations, and gruesome deaths. They may be fascinated with guns, knives, and other weapons, or listen to music with morbid and sinister lyrics.

If your teen is talking about wanting to die or has made a suicide attempt, he or she must be attended to *immediately*. Any suicide attempt—no matter how “harmless” it seems—requires a comprehensive evaluation by a qualified mental health professional who is knowledgeable about teen suicide. The evaluation should 1) determine your teen’s level of risk, 2) whether he or she suffers from a mental health or substance abuse disorder, 3) what current stressors are present, and 4) which strategies need to be in place to ensure his or her safety.

When teens are an imminent suicide risk, they may need to be hospitalized for a brief period to ensure their safety and stabilize their behavior. Hospitalization is to evaluate teens and keep them safe—the underlying issues triggering suicidal thoughts and behavior are typically not resolved. Therefore, follow-up with outpatient therapy (individual or family) immediately following discharge from a hospital is absolutely necessary.