

Suicide:

Questions Most Frequently Asked



"Why do people kill themselves?"

Fact: Most of the time people who kill themselves have a mental illness, which occurs when the chemicals in a person's brain get out of balance or become disrupted in some way. Healthy people do not kill themselves. A person who has depression does not think like a typical person who is feeling good. Their illness prevents them from being able to look forward to anything. They can only think about NOW and have lost the ability to imagine into the future. Many times they don't realize they are suffering from a treatable illness and they feel they can't be helped. Seeking help may not even enter their minds. They cannot think of their family or friends, because of their illness. They are consumed with emotional and, many times, physical pain that becomes unbearable. They don't see any way out. They feel hopeless and helpless. They don't want to die, but it's the only way they feel their pain will end. It is a non-rational act. Getting depression is involuntary - no one asks for it, just like people don't ask to get cancer or diabetes. But, we do know that depression is a treatable illness; that people can feel good again.

Depression, plus alcohol or drug use can be lethal. Many times people will try to alleviate the symptoms of their illness by drinking or using drugs. Alcohol and/or drugs will make the disease worse! There is an increased risk for suicide because alcohol and drugs decrease judgement and increase impulsivity.

"Do people who attempt suicide do it to prove something? To show people how bad they feel and to get sympathy?"

Fact: They don't do it necessarily to prove something, but it is certainly a cry for help, which should never be ignored. This is a warning to people that something is terribly wrong. Many times people cannot express how horrible or desperate they're feeling - they simply cannot put their pain into words. There is no way to describe it. A suicide attempt must always be taken seriously. The people who have attempted suicide in the past may be at risk for trying it again and possibly completing it, if they don't get help for their depression.

"Can suicidal persons mask their depression by appearing to be happy?"

Fact: We know that many people suffering from depression can hide their feelings, appearing to be happy. But, can a person who is contemplating suicide feign happiness? Yes, they can. But, most of the time, a suicidal person will give clues as to how desperate he or she is feeling. They may be subtle clues though and that's why knowing what to watch for is critical. A person may "hint" that he or she is thinking about suicide. They may say something like, "Everyone would be better off without me." Or, "It doesn't matter. I won't be around much longer anyway." We need to "key into" phrases like those instead of dismissing them as just talk. It is estimated that 80% of people who died of suicide mentioned it to a friend or relative before dying. Other danger signs are having a preoccupation with death, losing interest in things one cares about, giving things away, having a lot of "accidents" recently or engaging in risk-taking behavior, like speeding or reckless driving or general carelessness. Some people even joke about completing suicide - it should always be taken seriously.

"Is it more likely for a person to suicide if he or she has been exposed to it in their family or has had a close friend die of suicide?"

Fact: Depression and other related depressive illnesses have a genetic component. When these illnesses are left untreated (or mistreated) suicide can be the result. But talking about suicide or being aware of a suicide that happened in your family or to a close friend does not put you at risk for attempting it, if you are healthy. The only people who are at risk are those who are vulnerable in the first place - vulnerable because of an illness called depression or one of the other depressive illnesses. The risk increases if the illness is not treated. It's important to remember that not all people who have depression have suicidal thoughts - only some.

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“Why don't people talk about depression and suicide? ”

Fact: The main reason people don't talk about it is because of the stigma. People who suffer from depression are afraid that others will think they are "crazy", which is untrue. They simply may have depression. Society still hasn't accepted depressive illnesses like they've accepted other diseases. Until recently no one ever wanted to talk openly about alcoholism, now most people feel pretty comfortable discussing it with others if it's in their family. They talk of the effect it has had on their lives and different treatment plans. And everyone is educated on the dangers of alcohol and on substance abuse prevention. As for suicide, it's a topic that has a long history of being taboo - something that should just be forgotten, kind of swept under the rug. And that's why people keep dying. Suicide is misunderstood by most people, so the myths are perpetuated. Stigma prevents people from getting help and prevents society from learning more about suicide and depression. If everyone were educated on these subjects, many lives could be saved.

“Will "talking things out" cure depression? ”

Fact: The studies that have been done on “talk therapy” vs. using antidepressant medication have shown that, in some cases of depression, using well-supported psychotherapies, such as cognitive behavioral therapy or interpersonal therapy may considerably alleviate the symptoms of depression. In other cases, this simply wouldn't be enough. It would be like trying to talk a person out of having a heart attack. Studies continue to show that a combination of psychotherapy (talking therapies) and antidepressant medication is the most effective way of treating most people who suffer from depression.

“Why do people attempt suicide when they appear to have been feeling so much better? ”

Fact: Sometimes people who are severely depressed and contemplating suicide don't have enough energy to carry it out. But, as the disease begins to "lift" they may regain some of their energy but will still have feelings of hopelessness. There's also another theory that people just kind of "give in" to the anguished feelings (the disease), because they just can't fight it anymore. This, in turn, releases some of their anxiety, which makes them "appear" calmer. Even if they do die by suicide, it doesn't mean they chose it. If they knew they could have the life back that they had before the illness, they would choose life.

“If a person's "mind is made up", can they still be stopped? ”

Fact: Yes! People who are contemplating suicide go back and forth, thinking about life and death.....the pain can come in “waves”. They don't want to die, they just want the pain to stop. Once they know they can be helped, that there are treatments available for their illness, that it isn't their fault and that they are not alone, it gives them hope. We should never “give up” on someone just because we think they've made their mind up!

“Is depression the same as the blues? ”

Fact: No. Depression is different from the blues. The blues are normal feelings that eventually pass, like when a good friend moves away or the disappointment that a person feels if something didn't turn out as expected. Eventually the person will feel like his old self again. But the feelings and symptoms associated with depression linger, and no matter how hard a person tries to talk him or herself into feeling better, it just won't work. People can't snap themselves out of depression. It's not a character flaw or a personal weakness and it doesn't have anything to do with willpower. It is an illness.

“Why do depressive illnesses sometimes lead to suicidal thoughts? ”

Fact: There is a link between depressive illnesses and suicide. Depressive illnesses can distort thinking, so a person can't think clearly or rationally. They may not know they have a treatable illness or they may think they can't be helped. Their illness can cause thoughts of hopelessness and helplessness, which may then lead to suicidal thoughts. They just can't see any other way out. That's why it is so important to educate people on the symptoms of depression and other depressive illnesses and on the warning signs of suicide; so that people suffering from these illnesses can get the help they need. People must understand that depression and other related depressive illnesses are treatable and that they can feel good again.