



Suicide Risk

By Dr. Linda Hancock

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Hancock has written a regular weekly column entitled “All Psyched Up” for newspapers in two Canadian provinces for more than a dozen years. Over the years, her readers and clients have said that they have benefited from her common-sense solutions, wisdom, and sense of humour. Dr. Linda Hancock, the author of “Life is An Adventure...every step of the way” and “Open for Business Success” is a Registered Psychologist who has a private practice in Medicine Hat. She can be reached at 403-529-6877 or through email office@drlindahancock.com

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According to Alberta Health Services, this province has a higher rate of suicide than the national average. In fact, suicide is a leading cause of death in Alberta surpassing motor vehicle collisions, AIDs and homicides.

Most people don't have a lot of training or experience with suicide. As a result, a great deal of fear and helplessness can accompany the thought that someone might be suicidal. There are several things that you should know about suicide:

1. Treat every threat as serious - Never ignore, minimize or promise confidentiality when someone talks about suicide. Listen carefully and do not interrupt.
2. Think about warning signs - Has the person been faced with a difficult situation recently such as a job loss, unplanned pregnancy, divorce or health problem? Do you notice any changes in their mood, sleep, appetite, or participation in activities? Are they giving things away? Do they seem pre-occupied with death?
3. Consider the history - Have there been suicide attempts or incidents of self-harm in the past? Were there friends, relatives or role-models of the individual who committed suicide?
4. Ask the question - If someone "hints" or implies that life is not worth living ask "Are you suicidal?"
5. Don't make assumptions - People who commit suicide might never have suffered from mental illness. Most individuals who have suffered from mental illness are not suicidal.
6. Assess the risk level - Some people have thoughts of suicide when life is overwhelming but do not have any intention of following through. Their statement may be a "cry for help". Support and problem-solving options might be what they really need.
7. Determine if there is a plan - Ask questions about what the person might be considering. Be direct and get very specific information about what they are planning to do. Medium risk involves having thoughts, impulses and a plan.
8. Find out if they have the means - Does the person have opportunity to access what they need to fulfill their plan? If so, they are high risk. Do they have a gun, pills, a vehicle or other means that match their plan? Remember that being under the influence of a substance at the time also increases the risk.
9. Don't try to be a hero - Access services of a professional who will do an assessment and create a treatment plan. Call a Suicide Crisis line, take the person to the hospital or ask police to transport for you. Make sure that you share the information you have gathered with the professionals involved.
10. Let go! - Sometimes individuals are taken to an Emergency Room and are not admitted or are hospitalized and then released a day or two later. You may not agree with what is happening, but it is up to the professionals involved to develop an appropriate treatment plan to help the individual. It is NOT your responsibility to keep the person safe or alive.

Suicide affects so many people - the individual, family, friends and society at large. It is therefore important that we learn as much as possible about suicide and then are wise and compassionate.