



Delaware County Suicide Prevention Awareness Task Force

Suicide and Serious Mental Illness

Two myths of suicide are (i) mental illness is the cause and (ii) only individuals suffering from mental illness complete suicide. Serious mental illness is a major risk factor and it often exposes those it besets to other conditions that raise vulnerability, but it is not the cause of suicide. Suicide is always preventable and it never has to happen.

What's the problem?

- 5% of individuals with serious mental illness complete suicide
- About 6% of those with schizophrenia complete suicide
- 10% of suicides involve a depressive disorder
- Co-occurring mental illness and/or alcohol/drug use are common among victims

What are the key risk factors of suicide for those with a serious mental illness?

• Young age of onset of the illness	• Hopelessness/depressive episode
• Early stage of illness	• Inadequate psychiatric treatment
• After a psychiatric hospitalization	• Poor treatment adherence/treatment reductions
• Past attempt(s) or suicidal behavior	• Post-recurrence improvement periods
• Family history of suicide or self-harm	• Frequent recurrences/remissions

What are some important protective factors for those with a serious mental illness?

• Caring support system/peer support	• Treatment individualized to needs
• Optimism, resilience, recovery, wellness	• Willingness and ability to seek help
• No guns/weapons; unused medications	• Good problem-solving/coping/stress mgt. skills

What are some of the early warning signs of suicide risk?

Contact a mental health or medical provider if you encounter any of these behaviors:

• Hopelessness	• Rage, anger, revenge, recklessness
• Feeling trapped/no way out/helplessness	• Increasing alcohol and/or drug use
• Withdrawal from family, friends, supports	• Anxiety, agitation, sleep problems
• Dramatic mood changes	• Citing no reason for living, desire to die

What are the immediate danger signs of high suicide risk?

Immediately call 9-1-1 or the local crisis center (or 1-800-273-TALK) if you encounter:

- Someone threatening to hurt or kill herself or himself
- Someone looking for ways to take her or his life (i.e., a gun, stockpiling pills, other lethal means)
- Someone talking, writing, or drawing about death, dying, or suicide

What can you do to help prevent suicide among persons with serious mental illness?

- Make sure that all family members know the warning and danger signs of suicide and what to do.
- Dispose of old prescription/OTC medications
- Remove unused firearms and safely store/lock/disassemble firearms kept in the home.

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