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Psychiatrist Michael Yasinski M.D. in Phoenix discusses signs of suicide and how to help at-risk loved ones.



[Michael Yasinski M.D is a Phoniex-based psychiatrist who focuses on adults with psychiatric disorder or drug/alcohol addiction and the surrounding factors]

Every year, 30,000 people in the United States commit suicide. The damage done to a family is often irreparable. As a psychiatrist, I often treat families experiencing such grief and a common question they ask is, "Could I have done something to prevent this?" There are often no foreseeable signs; however, by understanding some of the recognizable risk factors, suicide can potentially be prevented. It is important to know that the diagnoses with the highest risk of suicide are major depression, bipolar disorder and alcoholism, especially when left untreated. Many risk factors for suicide, though, are not modifiable including being male, 65-plus in age and having a family history of suicide, all of which increase the risk of suicide.

There are several other risks that can be modified to lower the risk of suicide. Common modifiable signs include worsening insomnia; symptoms of anxiety and panic, due to the fact the mental and physical anguish is often unbearable; isolation from friends and family; not leaving the house; giving away possessions; losing interest in hobbies; and expressing feelings of hopelessness. With proper medication, therapy and family support, all of these can be effectively addressed.

Two other important factors to be aware of include the risk of having guns in the home and the dangers associated with changing patterns of alcohol or drug use. Suicide by a gun is the most common method of completed suicide for both men and women, although women actually attempt suicide more often by overdosing on pills. Removing guns or stock piles of pills from the home can prevent impulsive suicide attempts, which often occur during a state of intoxication or acute stress. It's also important to recognize new onset alcohol or drug use or worsening of an existing addiction, because this is often an indicator of rapid downhill progression.

If you do recognize any of these signs there are several steps to take. Removing guns from the home is imperative, even when met with resistance. Calling a doctor or psychiatrist immediately is essential and calling 911 is an option when imminent safety is a concern. The reality is, however, that appointments take time and these predicaments are often less clear-cut, leaving families feeling helpless. The best approach to take in these circumstances is to initiate an open, supportive dialogue with your loved one to provide a necessary outlet to deal with their emotions. By providing consistent love and support you can instill some hope for the future. Even a small flicker of light at the end of the tunnel can be the difference between life and death for someone. This is why the role of supportive family cannot be underestimated.

To get further helpful information, search "Suicide in America" at www.nimh.nih.gov.

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