

Seniors and Depression

Suicide information



People 65 years and older, particularly men, have the highest suicide rate of any other group.

Seniors are at greater risk of suicide than are younger people. The British Columbia Crisis Centre indicates that, “Statistics tell us that older adults, particularly older males, have high rates of suicide. Many older adults have symptoms of depression, yet they may not seek help, nor be treated for depression. We know, however, that there is a strong connection between depression and suicide. It is important to recognize the warning signs and reach out to someone who may be considering suicide.” (Canadian Coalition for Seniors’ Mental Health, 2006)

Suicide Warning Signs

Acute Signs

- Threatening to hurt or kill him/herself, or talking of wanting to hurt or kill him/herself
- Looking for ways to kill him/herself by seeking access to firearms, available pills, or other means
- Talking or writing about death, dying, or suicide, when these actions are out of the ordinary

“...call 9-1-1 right away and do not leave the person alone until help is on the scene.”

Additional Warning Signs

There is a mnemonic, “Is Path Warm”, that makes it easier to remember the signs to look for:

- **I**deation (thinking and talking of death)
- **S**ubstance Abuse
- **P**urposelessness
- **A**nxiety/Agitation
- **T**rapped (feeling that there is no way out, nowhere to get help, a wish to get away from everything)
- **H**opelessness/Helplessness
- **W**ithdrawal (isolating oneself from those around you)
- **A**nger
- **R**ecklessness
- **M**ood Changes

(American Association of Suicidology, 2012)

If you suspect that a senior is feeling suicidal there are some things you can do. If you believe there is an immediate danger based on the acute signs shown above, call 9-1-1 right away and **do not leave the person alone until help is on the scene.**

If you are seeing some of the additional warning signs shown above ask gentle questions about what might be going on for the person.

- ask the person if they have a plan
- ask the person if they have written any notes to anyone saying goodbye
- ask the person if they have the means to carry out their plan (if they want to use a gun do they have access to one? If they want to overdose do they have the medication on hand to do so?)
- ask the person whether or not they have tried suicide in the past

Sometimes we are fearful to ‘bring up’ things that might put ideas into someone’s head, be assured that if someone is talking of suicide they already have thought about it quite a bit. It’s important to openly talk about problem solving as an alternative to suicide.

Make sure when you are discussing suicidal feelings that you are supportive and non judgemental, sometimes seniors can feel like they are ‘bothering’ you or being troublesome if they speak up. Also remember that stigma around mental illness can make people feel uncomfortable discussing such inner feelings and problems. Reassure the person that you care, that you have plenty of time to talk and that you will help them get help. It is important that you do not promise to keep suicidal thoughts or plans a secret. If the person will only talk to you if you promise to keep it to yourself, do not promise this. If you suspect someone is suicidal and will not speak to you, get help for that person. While the person may be angry with you it is better to lose the relationship than to risk the person taking their life.

Below are some resources for more information.

Mood Disorders Association of BC www.mdabc.net, 604.873.0103

BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information, www.heretohelp.bc.ca

Canadian Coalition for Seniors’ Mental Health www.ccsmh.ca, 416.785.2500 ext. 6331

Crisis Centre Seniors’ Distress Line 604.872.1234, www.crisiscentre.bc.ca

