SUBSTANCE USE TO SUICIDE...

Every year 40,000-50,000 people die by suicide. That's about 120 people a day. Over 12 million American adults have seriously considered suicide. However, people with a substance use disorder are six times more likely to commit suicide than the general population. In fact, suicide is a leading cause of death among people who misuse alcohol and drugs. Approximately 22% of deaths by suicide involved alcohol intoxication, and opiates were present in 20% of suicide deaths.

Why are people with substance use disorders more at risk of suicide?

People think drugs or alcohol may alleviate short-term depression, anxiety or other mental health issues. But, in the long term, these issues only get worse with substance use. Alcohol is a depressant. It acts on the brain the same way drugs do–chemically. These chemicals change the way the brain works, making depressive episodes more severe. Drugs and alcohol worsen the problem by increasing negative thoughts and self-destructive behavior. Drinking alcohol or taking drugs can loosen inhibitions, contributing to bad judgement and leading to impulsive decisions without any thought to other options or outcomes and can end in tragedy.

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES
SUBSTANCE USE PROBLEMS

Mental health issues and substance use problems share common causes: Brain chemistry, family history, and past trauma are all triggers for both.

People who use drugs or alcohol often experience dramatic life changes–starting or stopping treatment, relapse, jail time, and/or loss of family. This makes them especially vulnerable to suicide.

Addiction is a mental illness. It feeds negatively into a person's mental health. Individuals get caught in a cycle of hopelessness. Job loss, relationship issues, and legal issues are all consequences of addiction, and when those consequences and life changes combine, for some they feel they only have two choices: continued drug use or suicide.

People in treatment for substance use disorders are the most at risk. They are at a point where their addiction has spiraled out of control. They enter treatment when life crises may be occurring and they may be at the peak of depressive episodes.

RESOURCES

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA):

www.samhsa.gov

National Institute on Drug Abuse:

www.drugabuse.gov

National Suicide Prevention Hotline:

Call or Text: 988

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:

www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

GET YOUR LIFE >INFOCUS

>INFOCUS

SUBSTANCE USE AND SUICIDE:
UNDERSTANDING THE CONNECTION

Risk Factors of Suicide

Risk factors are characteristics in an individual or their environment that increases their likelihood to die by suicide. They include:

- Prior suicide attempt(s)
- Use of alcohol or other drugs
- Mental health or mood disorders
- Access to lethal means
- Knowing someone who died by suicide
- Social isolation
- Chronic disease and disability
- Lack of access to behavioral health care

Risk factors can also vary by sex, age, and culture. Stress, anxiety, prejudice, and bullying are also predicting factors for suicide.

Warning Signs

Warning signs are different, as these behaviors may signal an immediate attempt at suicide. Help from a mental health professional should be sought immediately.

- Talking about wanting to die or suicide
- Looking for a way to kill oneself
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live

Other signs may include:

- Talking about feeling trapped or in pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious or agitated; odd behavior
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing anger or wanting revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings

Don't Go It Alone: Get the Support You Need!

The National Suicide Prevention Hotline is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to help those in need. **CALL OR TEXT: 988**.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) is also there to help. **CALL: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)**.

These services are free and confidential, and will help you get help for yourself, a friend, or family member in need.

Watching a loved one cope with substance use and suicidal thoughts is heartbreaking. Very few family members or friends are trained to handle such an issue. That's why it is important to reach out to professionals. People in trouble are not alone. Trained health professionals can work with the individual and family to provide a treatment program.

It is important to know that there is not one single cause of suicide. There is no single action to take that will prevent suicide. Fortunately, most acute suicide episodes are short-lived. Even individuals at high, long-term risk spend more time being nonsuicidal than being suicidal. Because of this, there is hope that those who consider suicide can get help.

Treatment programs that combine counseling for substance use and mental illness are the most successful. It is estimated that one-third of people diagnosed with depression also have a substance use disorder. It is important that a treatment program addresses both issues to stop the cycle. These combined programs are the start for individuals to achieve a sober and healthy life.

Protective Factors

The following factors lower the risk for suicide. It's important to know that while these lower the risk, they do not prevent suicide completely.

- Reasons for living
- Being clean and sober
- Attendance at 12-Step support groups
- Religious attendance and/or internalized spiritual teachings against suicide
- Having or raising a child
- A healthy marriage
- Trusting relationship with a counselor, physician, or other service provider
- Employment
- Optimistic personality

What to do

If you think a person is having suicidal thoughts, ask them directly.

1) If the person has thoughts about suicide: "Are you thinking about killing yourself?"

If they answer yes, don't panic. Remember to be compassionate and find out the following:

2) If they have plans to do so: "Do you think you might try to hurt yourself today?"

3) If they have access to lethal means: "Do you have pills/weapons in the house?"

Take all suicide threats seriously. Listen and look for the warning signs and risk factors listed above.

Act. If you think the person may harm him or herself, do not leave them alone. Say, "I'm going to get you some help." Call the National Suicide Prevention hotline. The call is completely confidential. They are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week with free help and support to those considering suicide or those trying to help them.

Understanding is Key

It's important to listen without judgement. The objective of ask, listen, look and act is to get the person help if they need it–not to convince them that suicide is wrong. By starting a conversation and providing support, we can direct help to those who need it. Be prepared to show where, when, or how a person can get help. Be empathic–look at the world through their eyes. Finally, remember to follow up in the long term. Keep in contact regularly to show that you care.