

# FACING SUICIDE



## Toolkit Article #1: Understanding Suicide

### UNDERSTANDING SUICIDE

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention consider suicide a public health crisis, and rates have been generally rising since 1999. In the United States, more than 54% of people have known someone who died by suicide. Still, researchers find reasons to hope as they learn more about the risk factors that can contribute to suicide and develop improved methods for prevention. Experts agree that all of us can play a part in preventing suicides by learning about risk factors, warning signs, how to limit access to deadly means, and ways to respond. Watch our series of toolkit videos to learn more about suicide and ways you can help prevent it in your community.

If you are considering suicide or if you or someone you know is in emotional crisis, call or text 988 for confidential, free, crisis support.

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Amber Dykshorn and her three kids love to spend time on the water, boating, fishing, and water tubing. Before he died by suicide, water was also an important place of solace for her husband Chris.

“When I first noticed that Chris was depressed was in April of 2019,” says Amber, “just a couple of months before he passed away. Chris started becoming very withdrawn. He was very sad. He cried a lot. Chris just didn't do many of the things that he enjoyed doing.”

Fishing was one of the activities Chris stopped doing in the last year of his life.

In the United States, more than 54% of individuals have known someone who died by suicide. Every community is impacted, but fatalities are highest among middle-aged and older white men, and suicide occurs at higher rates among certain groups, including Native American/Alaska Native and Black men. Rural areas, like Chris and Amber’s farming community in South Dakota, are especially affected as stresses are high and mental health practitioners are often in short supply.

“The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] is approaching suicide as a public health crisis because the rate in the United States has been on the rise since about 1999,” says Dr. Christine Moutier, Chief Medical Officer for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. Like many of her colleagues

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who study suicide, Dr. Moutier gleans hope from recent discoveries that have led to a deeper understanding of the risk factors that may lead people to consider suicide.

“It is really important to understand that suicide has multiple risk factors that converge, that come together,” Dr. Moutier said, “and those are things that relate to impulsivity, aggression, experiences from the past: adversity, trauma, abuse. It's not really ever going to be one issue that causes suicide.”

Dr. Moutier also cites mental health conditions, like depression or substance abuse disorder, which can contribute to suicidal thoughts. Most people who die by suicide have a mental health condition that makes them more vulnerable to other risk factors, and can increase the impact of stressors or difficult life experiences.

As researchers understand more about the causes of suicide, they also learn more about prevention.

“What’s compelling to me about being a suicidologist is the idea of saving lives, and to really find out what makes life worth living,” says Dr. David Jobes, Professor of Psychology and Associate Director of Clinical Training at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. “We’ve learned so much in the decades of research that I’ve been involved with as to why people want to die, and that when you really study that and understand it, you can flip it around and understand a lot about what gives people purpose and meaning.”

Suicide prevention experts agree that all of us can play an important role in helping to prevent suicide, and the first step is to *ask the question*. Asking someone in crisis directly if they are considering suicide is an important first step; listening with empathy, staying with the person in crisis, and getting help from a medical professional or mental health practitioner comes next. Never leave a person who is in an emotional crisis alone, they urge.

To learn more about the signs of suicide and how to respond, watch the next videos in our series.

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