

FACING SUICIDE



Toolkit Article #2: Seeing the Signs

SEEING THE SIGNS

Suicide prevention experts agree that you don't need to be a doctor or trained professional to recognize the signs of suicide in friends or loved ones. Seeing the signs and acting with empathy can help save lives. Follow Fonda Bryant, a suicide reduction activist with lived experience who knows firsthand the important role friends and family can play in seeing the signs of suicide. Fonda now trains community members to recognize hopelessness, isolation, increased sense of burdensomeness, and other important signs that a person may be at risk.

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.

Fonda Bryant is a suicide reduction activist who trains community members to recognize common signs of suicide. Fonda's hard-won knowledge of suicide comes from her own experiences with suicidal thoughts, leading to a crisis that nearly ended her life.

Fortunately for Fonda, her beloved Aunt Spankie recognized that Fonda was experiencing an emotional crisis and asked if she was considering suicide. When Fonda admitted that she was suicidal, Aunt Spankie acted immediately and got Fonda emergency help – actions Fonda now considers heroic.

"All heroes don't wear capes," quips Fonda on a sunny South Carolina afternoon as she and Aunt Spankie reflect on the experience together. Aunt Spankie was attuned to Fonda's hopelessness and became especially concerned when Fonda offered up her prized shoe collection.

"That was an instant indication that something was wrong," says Aunt Spankie, "because we are serious about shoes."

The signs of suicide vary from person to person but Sean Joe, a leading expert on suicidal behavior and Professor of Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis, shares some common signs for which to watch.

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“If you find an individual, whether it’s a child or a spouse or a friend, who’s starting to not do the things that you know they love to do, that should begin to signal to you that something is different in their life,” says Dr. Joe. “We see people start to change their behavior, they start to not eat, they start to express thoughts like, ‘I don’t want to be here anymore,’ or they might even express, ‘I want to die,’ or ‘Life is too difficult for me. I can’t go on.’ These sorts of expressions, it’s important that we pay attention to them.”

Hopelessness, lack of purpose, or an increased sense of causing burden are also important signs to watch. Experts agree that understanding the signs of suicide can help save lives, and that if you notice someone exhibiting those signs, there are steps you can take to keep friends and loved ones safe.

Aunt Spankie asked Fonda directly if she was considering suicide, a question experts agree is an important first step. If someone is thinking about suicide, they say, stay with the person. Listen to them with empathy and stay with them until they can get help from a medical professional or mental health practitioner. Never leave a person in crisis alone.

For more information about suicide and how to respond to a loved one in crisis, watch the other videos in our series.

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