

FACING SUICIDE



Toolkit Article #4: Means Matter

MEANS MATTER

Around 1.2 million people in the United States made suicide attempts in 2019. The vast majority survived, yet experts agree that the methods people use for a suicide attempt have a major impact. In the US, firearms take an especially tragic toll. In fact, the majority of gun deaths are not homicides – they are suicides. Prevention experts urge family and friends to remove deadly means, including guns, when someone in the household is in crisis. Learn more about why means matter and why experts agree that limiting access to deadly means is critical.

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.

Thomas Joiner studies the behavior and motivations of people who die by suicide. A professor at Florida State University Psychology Clinic, Dr. Joiner entered the field of suicidology after his father died by suicide.

“Suicide is a catastrophe for families, and I don’t think catastrophe is an exaggeration,” says Dr. Joiner. “I think it’s very apt because it just shocks and stuns individuals and families. They are confused and feeling searing emotional pain for months if not years, sometimes even decades and this reverberates throughout generations.”

Experts are learning much about risk factors, prevention, and how to help those at risk for suicide. They know that for people who make suicide attempts, means matter.

“If you have a lethal means [of suicide], it’s more likely to result in death,” says Dr. Sean Joe, who studies suicide at Washington University in St. Louis. Experts agree that limiting access to deadly means during a crisis can save lives, and they note that firearms are especially lethal.

Responsible gun ownership is an important step in limiting suicide deaths by firearm. Storing firearms safely and securely, away from ammunition, is key. Most experts recommend removing firearms from the home during times of crisis, if possible.

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“The more we can keep someone from the access to something that could be lethal, the better chance we have at saving their life,” says Dr. Dan Reidenberg of Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE). He notes that limiting access to deadly means goes beyond responsible gun ownership, pointing out that locking up or removing poisons, restricting access to pills, and even adding barriers to public spaces like bridges and train platforms can all help prevent suicide deaths.

Experts believe that blocking access to lethal means of suicide can be highly effective, because if suicidal people are stopped in their attempt they often do not go on to try to harm themselves. It allows time for the crisis to diminish and for help to arrive.

Today, Dr. Joiner trains students who will become the next generation of therapists and clinical psychologists. He feels hope as his students gain a better understanding of what causes suicide and how to prevent it.

“It's always been about preventing these tragedies from happening today,” says Dr. Joiner. “That's been the ultimate goal.”

To learn more about the risk factors, signs of suicide, and ways to respond, watch the other videos in our series.

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