

Your Personal Coach

By

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Dear Kathleen,

My friend is going through a really hard time. He failed 12th grade so he has to repeat while everyone else in our crowd is graduating. Last year, his parents got divorced and yesterday his girlfriend broke up with him. He says there's no reason to live and that he would kill himself if he had the guts. He told me not to tell anyone but I told my mother what he said. She said that people who say they are going to commit suicide never do and that I should get him to change the subject when he starts to talk about it. But, I'm worried about him anyway. What should I do?

-- Kevin

Dear Kevin,

You were right to talk with your mother – you cannot be bound by secrecy when your friend's life may be at stake. But your mom is wrong in her belief that people who commit suicide don't tell others – eight out of ten people who commit suicide give very clear warnings about their intentions.

I'm sure your mother believes it's best to encourage your friend not talk about suicide, but the worst thing you could do is to change the subject when he talks about his feelings. Instead, you should listen with care and give him a chance to express himself.

Talk honestly with your friend. Be direct, show him that you take his feelings seriously. Ask: "Do you feel so bad that you are thinking of suicide?" If he answers, "yes," then ask him if he has thought about how he might do it. If he has a definite plan, a method, a time, or any other details clearly set in his mind, or if he has made any suicide attempts in the past, the risk of suicide is much higher.

Don't worry that asking your friend direct questions might "lead" him to think about suicide. He has told you that he is already thinking about it. The greatest danger lies in not asking these questions, and not taking his thoughts and feelings seriously. Respond to him with love, not shock or negative judgments.

If you have noticed personality changes or behaviors like shifts in sleeping or eating habits, aggressiveness, withdrawal, sudden loss of interest in prized possessions or activities, overwhelming guilt, self-hate, or other symptoms of depression in your friend, these, too, indicate a higher risk of suicide.

Especially be on the lookout for alcohol or drug use. When people are under the influence of these substances, they become increasingly depressed and often make desperate and impulsive decisions.

Your friend is in a serious situation and you're right to be concerned. He's had a lot of loss in a very short time and is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and hopeless about the future. Right now he can't see any way out of his pain and those are exactly the kinds of feelings that cause some people to attempt or commit suicide.

We all feel sad and hopeless from time to time, but tragically, suicide is a permanent solution to temporary problems. Nevertheless, more than 30,000 Americans commit suicide each year and more than half a million attempt it.

Perhaps because of the stress and complex decisions demanded of young people making the transition to adulthood, this is a particularly risky time of life for suicide.

Most people are not aware that suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students and the third-leading cause of death among teenagers and young adults.

In addition to your friend's age, he is going through painful changes in his family with his parents' divorce. Not graduating with the rest of his friends and the breakup with his girlfriend have left him with feelings of low self-worth, helplessness, and despair.

Kevin, your friend needs the help of a first-rate counselor or therapist. He doesn't realize it right now, but his depression is very treatable. If your friend is reading this column, I hope that he will understand that, with help, he can rise above his pain, grow, and be stronger in getting through future difficulties in his life.

He does not always have to feel this bad, and he is not alone (he has a compassionate friend in you), but it's clear that he's lost perspective. He can't see the light at the end of the tunnel, but it is there.

Tell your friend how much you care about him and you want to help. If you think the threat of suicide is immediate, do not leave him alone. Instead, take him to a hospital emergency room.

If the threat is not immediate, then go with him to talk to his parents, a teacher, guidance counselor, or minister. These adults can help your friend find a therapist who is experienced in working with young people who are depressed and contemplating suicide.

Tell him that you value your agreements with him but that above all, you value him, and you care enough about him to get help when he is facing something this potentially dangerous.

And don't be put off this course if he suddenly says that he feels better and is no longer thinking about killing himself. Quite often, this apparent lifting of depression signals a time of the greatest danger for a reversal. This is a time when even the slightest difficulty can throw someone over the edge.

Often when someone has resolved to commit suicide, they behave very calmly — the throes of the decisions are over, they know what they are going to do.

Remember that your friend doesn't really want to die. He wants his pain to end. And that can happen — there are many ways to make that happen — but none of them requires his death. He is very lucky to have a good, caring friend like you.

For more information about the prevention of suicide, read Kay Redfield Jamison's *Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide* (Knopf, 1999). On the Internet, go to www.spanusa.org (Suicide Prevention Advocacy Network), www.afsp.org (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention), and www.nimh.nih.gov (National Institute of Mental Health). Call the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill Helpline for resources in your area at 1-800-950-NAMI (6264).

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com, call 473-4004, or direct questions to the Outer Banks Sentinel, P.O. Box 546, Nags Head, NC 27949

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