



# Adolescent Risk and Protective Factors for Suicide

In 2017, suicide was the second leading cause of death among adolescents between the ages of 10 to 19, according to data from the National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System.

Risk and protective factors are the personal and environmental characteristics that can *increase* (risk factors) and *decrease* (protective factors) the likelihood of suicide in an individual or a group. Although some factors cannot be changed, such as an adolescent’s family history of suicide, other factors can be changed, such as getting treatment for substance abuse and reducing access to lethal means. Effective prevention efforts should seek to reduce risk factors and increase protective factors.

The following are a few key points about risk and protective factors:

- Suicide risk is usually greater among people with more than one risk factor.
- Risk and protective factors in an adolescent’s life may change often, even weekly or daily.

## Risk Factors for Suicide in Adolescents

<b>Behavioral Health Issues/Disorders</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depressive and anxiety disorders and other mental health disorders</li> <li>• Substance abuse or dependence (alcohol and other drugs)</li> <li>• Previous suicide attempt</li> <li>• Self-injury (without intent to die)</li> </ul>
<b>Personal Characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hopelessness</li> <li>• Low self-esteem</li> <li>• Social alienation and isolation, lack of belonging</li> </ul>
<b>Adverse/Stressful Life Circumstances</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpersonal difficulties or losses (e.g., breaking up with a girlfriend or boyfriend or family problems)</li> <li>• Bullying, either as a victim or a perpetrator</li> <li>• Physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse</li> <li>• Exposure to suicide of a peer</li> <li>• Family history of suicide</li> <li>• Parent mental health problems</li> <li>• Problems in school (academic and/or disciplinary)</li> </ul>
<b>Access to Means</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to lethal means, such as guns or pills, especially in the home</li> </ul>

## A Note about the Role of *Impulsivity* in Adolescent Suicide

People often ask about the role that impulsivity plays in adolescent suicide. Experts think about impulsivity’s role in two different ways—first as a behavioral trait (that an individual can possess) and second when the act of suicide itself is (or appears) impulsive in nature. Evidence on the exact role that impulsivity plays in adolescent suicide is inconclusive.



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## Protective Factors for Suicide in Adolescents

<b>Individual Characteristics and Behaviors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong problem-solving and coping skills</li> <li>• Psychological or emotional well-being</li> <li>• Positive self-esteem</li> <li>• Cultural and religious beliefs that affirm life and discourage suicide</li> <li>• Resilience: Ongoing or continuing sense of hope in the face of adversity</li> </ul>
<b>Family and Other Social Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family support, connectedness to family, closeness to or strong relationship with parents, and parental involvement</li> <li>• Close friends, a caring adult, and social support</li> </ul>
<b>School</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safe school environment (especially for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth)</li> <li>• Adequate or better academic achievement</li> <li>• Sense of connectedness to the school</li> </ul>
<b>Health and Mental Health Care</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easy access to care and support through ongoing relationships with health and mental health care providers</li> </ul>
<b>Access to Means</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restricted access to firearms: guns locked or unloaded, ammunition stored or locked, or no guns in the home</li> <li>• Restricted access to pills (such as prescription medications)</li> </ul>

## Preventing Adolescent Suicide

People who work with adolescents—such as mental health providers, coaches, and teachers—can promote protective factors in the following ways:

- Enhance life skills and resilience
  - » Offer skill-building workshops that address common stressors (e.g., relationship issues) and teach mindfulness and stress reduction
  - » Create a school environment that promotes and encourages qualities such as empathy and optimism
  - » Provide resources and information that help adolescents cope with life transitions
- Promote social connectedness and support
  - » Support development of relationships between youth and positive adults (e.g., teachers and coaches)
  - » Implement activities in schools that help students increase and strengthen their social networks
  - » Provide professional development and support for teachers and other school staff to enable them to meet the diverse cognitive, emotional, and social needs of adolescents

**Concerned about an adolescent? Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255).**

Sources:

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