**Reaching Out to Older Adults: Know the Signs and Find the Words**

Most people who attempt suicide give some indication of their thoughts and feelings prior to taking action. These warning signs may be behaviors, words or attitude changes. Learning to recognize these signs and how to respond appropriately are actions that you can take that may help save a life.

**The most critical warning signs of suicide are:**

* + Talking about wanting to die or about suicide
  + Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
  + Looking for ways to kill oneself

If someone you know shows any of those signs, call 1-800-273-8255 immediately. You will be connected to the nearest crisis center and a trained counselor will advise you.

**Additional warning signs of suicidality among older adults include:**

* Loss of interest in things or activities that are usually found enjoyable.
* Cutting back on self-care and grooming.
* Being alone for long periods of time, becoming socially isolated.
* Breaking medical regimens (such as going off diets, prescriptions) or skipping doctor appointments.
* Feeling hopeless and/ or worthless.
* Putting affairs in order, giving things away, or making changes in wills – especially when combined with other warning signs.
* Stock-piling medication or obtaining other lethal means such as a firearm.
* A preoccupation with death or a lack of concern about personal safety. Remarks such as "This is the last time that you'll see me" or "I won't be needing any more appointments" should raise concern.

Recent life changes such as the loss of a spouse or loved one may trigger more of these warning signs. Periods of heightened concern include those times as well as immediately after discharge from a nursing home or rehab center.

**Depression in older adults often shows up in these ways:**

* Complaints of aches and pains.
* Fatigue.
* Slowed movements and speech.
* Loss of appetite.
* Inability to sleep or insomnia.
* Weight increase or decrease.
* Blurred vision, dizziness, heart racing, anxiety.
* Inability to concentrate, remember or think straight (sometimes mistaken for dementia).
* An overall sadness or apathy, withdrawn; unable to find pleasure in anything.
* Irritability, mood swings or constant complaining; nothing seems to make the person happy.
* Talk of worthlessness, not being needed anymore, excessive and unwarranted guilt.
* Frequent doctor visits without relief in symptoms; all tests come out negative.

If these symptoms appear, effort needs to be made to ensure that they aren’t disregarded as simply being “part of aging.” Consult with a healthcare professional and ask that the patient be screened for depression.

**How to start the conversation**

There are many ways to have a discussion with someone you are concerned about. Here are some suggestions of starting the conversation. Ask directly about suicide if warning signs are present.

*Dad, I’ve noticed some changes in you recently that are worrying me. You used to spend time at the barbershop with your buddies but you haven’t had a haircut in a long time. And you’re losing weight. Are you feeling all right? Is there something troubling you?*

*Joe, it’s not like you to avoid your friends. And I heard you say something earlier today about not being around to see who gets elected. I remember when Doug was suicidal a couple of years ago. Are you thinking about suicide?*

*Grandma, I’m worried about you. You just don’t seem yourself lately. I think your appetite is off and you haven’t been going to church lately. I’d like to make an appointment for you with your doctor and go with you to make sure that you aren’t experiencing depression. If you are, there are some good treatments that could help you feel much better.*