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Suicide is death caused by injuring oneself with the intent to die. It is an act a person willingly takes to end his or her own life. A suicide attempt involves a serious act, such as taking a fatal amount of medication, but not dying from it, either because the dose was not adequate to achieve the goal, or because someone intervened in time.

A suicide gamble is one in which people gamble their lives that they will be found in time and that the discoverer will save them from dying. For example, an individual takes a fatal dose of drugs with the belief that family members will be home before death occurs. Close to 800,000 people die worldwide due to suicide every year. For every suicide there are many more people who attempt suicide every year. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15–29 year olds.



Questions

for Dr Thapelo Motshudi

Dr Thapelo Motshudi is a specialist in private practice. He is a consultant for NMG in the areas of Employee Wellness, Occupational Health and any other medical related topics.

1 What are the causes of suicide?

There is no cause for suicide, but several factors correlate with serious attempted and completed suicides, including:

- Mental illness, such as depression and bipolar mood disorder
- Gender - men have a significantly higher rate of completed suicides than women. There is nearly four times the number of completed suicides among men than among women.
- However, women have a much higher rate of suicide attempts
- Availability of firearms
- Family history – a family history of suicide represents a significant risk factor for the same behaviour in children.
- Life experiences, such as loss of a loved one, physical illness or financial instability.

A prior suicide attempt is the single most important risk factor for suicide in the general population.

2 What are some of the suicide-related characteristics?

Individuals who are suicidal have several characteristics, including the following:

- A preoccupation with death
- A sense of isolation and withdrawal
- Few friends or family members
- An emotional distance from others — although the opposite can also be true, in that people can seem superficially happy and outgoing
- Distraction and lack of humour — they often seem to be "in their own world"
- Focus on the past — they dwell in past losses and defeats and anticipate no future; they voice the notion that the world would be better off without them
- The mood is dominated by hopelessness and helplessness — they view themselves as helpless and cannot liberate themselves from the depression in which they are drowning, and they believe that no one else can help them.

3 What can be done to help?

Always take someone seriously if they indicate that they are considering suicide. Don't be afraid to ask questions about their plans. Let them know you care and that they are not alone. Encourage them to seek help immediately from a knowledgeable professional and don't leave them alone.

- Ask someone you are worried about if they're thinking about suicide. While people may be hesitant to ask, research shows this is helpful
- Keep them safe. Reduce access to lethal means for those at risk
- Be there for them and listen to what they need
- Help them connect with an ongoing support system
- Early identification, treatment and care of people with mental and/or substance abuse disorders, chronic pain and acute emotional distress
- Don't judge or debate whether suicide is right or wrong and don't lecture on the value of life
- Don't act shocked as this will put distance between you
- Stay connected and follow up to see how they're doing
- Support groups are very helpful, and you can call the **South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG)** to talk on behalf of a loved one, colleague, or friend
- If employed, contact your Employee Assistance Programme (EAP).

Suicides are generally preventable. It is a complex issue and therefore suicide prevention efforts require coordination and collaboration among multiple sectors of society. These efforts must be comprehensive and integrated, as no single approach alone can make an impact. As with mental illness, one of the biggest barriers to preventing suicide is stigma, which prevents many people from seeking help.

People who attempt suicide and survive may experience serious injuries, such as broken bones or organ failure. These injuries can have long-term effects on their health. They can also develop depression and other mental health problems as a result. It is therefore essential that they are also provided with additional support.



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