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Suicide

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Summary: Suicide is the act of ending one's life, and often occurs when people feel overwhlmed by stresses in their lives, such as mental health issues (e.g. depression, anxiety or substance use problems), or stresses at home, school or work. Individuals consider suicide when they feel they have no other way of coping. The good news however, is that there are always other alternatives...

Introduction

Suicide is not a topic most people want to talk about; but odds are you know someone who has attempted or died by suicide. Maybe you've even lost a friend, family member or coworker to suicide. At last count, 3613 people in Canada took their own lives. That's more lives lost than from traffic accidents and murders combined that year. Suicide has been called a "hidden epidemic," it's time to take it out of the shadows.

Who does it affect?

Studies show that up to 90% of people who take their own lives have depression, substance use problems or another mental disorder—whether diagnosed or not—at the time of their suicide. Most people who attempt or complete suicide don't necessarily want to die; rather they want to escape their overwhelming emotional pain. Ten to 15% of people with a mental illness will end up taking their own lives.

There are a number of other factors that can put someone at higher risk of completing suicide:

- **Age:**
  - Canadian seniors make up 12% of all suicides. In BC, the suicide rate for all men averages out to 17.5 deaths per 100,000 people; men over 85 have double that rate. A shrinking circle of friends, the death of a spouse or a major illness can all lead to depression and in turn lead to suicide. Aboriginal elders are an exception to this trend.
  - Suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people in BC, Canada and worldwide. About 7% of BC teenagers said they attempted suicide in the past year. Stress, loneliness, fighting with family or friends, feelings of "not measuring up" and a loss of hope for the future can all contribute to youth feeling overwhelmed, and may lead them to consider suicide as a way out.
- **Gender:**

    - In Canada, for every female death by suicide there are three male suicides. However women are more likely than men to attempt suicide. Women tend to choose less violent forms of suicide, leaving more opportunity for rescue. They also tend to seek help from friends and professionals more often.

- **Social and cultural factors:**
    - While many Aboriginal communities have rates of suicide that are much higher than the general population, some Aboriginal communities have rates of suicide that are very low or zero. Those communities with low rates of suicide are those that are working towards self-governance, are actively engaged in settling their land claims, have recovered many traditional practices and enjoy greater control over the delivery of local services.
    - Studies on the rate of suicide in the Canadian immigrant population have had conflicting results. While one Canadian study found that the suicide rate in immigrants was closer to the rate of suicide in Canada, another found that the suicide rate was closer to the immigrant group's home country. There is likely extreme under-reporting of suicides in the immigrant population because in many cultures suicide is considered shameful. What is agreed on is that personal factors such as learning to speak the host country language, ethnic pride and a positive attitude toward the new country's culture can reduce stress. Social resources, such as family and ethnic community support and a warm welcome by the new country can also reduce stress, leading to more positive mental health. There has been very little research done on the suicide rates in Canada's refugee population.

Is someone you know thinking about suicide?

Most people who take their own lives show some noticeable signs that they are thinking about it beforehand. Thankfully, if these signs are recognized, immediate action taken and support given, many lives can be saved. There are ten warning signs that experts suggest you should watch out for. To help you remember them, they spell out IS PATH WARM?

Has someone you know:

- Talked about or threatened to hurt or kill themselves, or looked for ways to do it? [**I** = Ideation]
- Increased their use of alcohol or other drugs? [**S** = Substance use]
- Mentioned having no reason to live or no purpose in life? [**P** = Purposelessness]
- Showed increased anxiety and changes in sleep patterns? [**A** = Anxiety]
- Talk about feeling trapped, like there's no way out? [**T** = Trapped]
- Expressed feeling hopeless about the future? [**H** = Hopelessness]
- Withdrawn from friends, family members or activities they enjoy? [**W** = Withdrawal]
- Shown uncontrolled anger or say they want to seek revenge? [**A** = Anger]
- Engaged in risky activities, seemingly without thinking? [**R** = Recklessness]
- Experienced dramatic changes in their mood? [**M** = Mood change]

If you see several of these behaviours, especially the first one, it is important to take them seriously and get help right away.

What can I do about it?

If you think someone you know is considering suicide:

- Remind yourself that all talk of suicide must be taken seriously

- Say to the person:
    - "You are really important to me"
    - "I don't want you to die"
    - "It's reasonable to feel like you do, but I can help you find other solutions"

- If you are concerned that someone you know may be considering suicide, ask a direct question like "Are you thinking about suicide?". You won't be putting the idea in the person's head; chances are if they are

thinking about it, they will be relieved to tell someone.

- Seeing a doctor or mental health professional is often the next step for the person. Remember to maintain your support if the person is getting help for a mental illness like depression. The early days of treatment, before the person feels like themselves again but when they may feel well enough to carry out a plan, is the time professionals, family and friends should still monitor warning signs carefully.

- Call your local Distress Line. If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide the best thing to do is contact your local crisis line first. Trained suicide prevention volunteers can help you or your loved one, plus connect you to local emergency mental health services if you need them. Confidentiality can be waived in life or death situations. Even if you have doubts about you or your loved one's chances of actually attempting suicide, it is always best to call.

For more information

- **Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)**
  The CMHA has information and various suicide related services.
  Web: www.cmha.ca

- **Centre for Suicide Prevention**
  The Centre does not provide services to those who are feeling suicidal, nonetheless, it has information and links to various suicide resources
  Web: www.suicideinfo.ca

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