

Suicide Contagion: Facts and Fiction

Does Suicide Contagion Really Exist?

Unfortunately, it does. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention define contagion as "a process by which exposure to the suicide or suicide behavior of one or more persons influences others to commit or attempt suicide". The risk for imitation or contagion appears highest in adolescence.

What Contributes To Contagion?

One of the most significant factors that has been identified as contributing to contagion is when the death is sensationalized or glamorized. This can happen through media coverage or when there are memorial tributes or events that can be perceived as glorifying the deceased. While always well intentioned, these can sometimes encourage copycat behavior in vulnerable youth.

Who Are "Vulnerable" Youth?

There are several factors that can make youth vulnerable to suicide risk:

- A close relationship with the deceased
- Witnessing the event
- Contact with the deceased, positive or negative, especially in close proximity to the death
- History of personal losses or exposure to other suicides
- History of previous suicide attempts, drug/alcohol abuse
- Preoccupation with morbid thoughts

If Youth Are Already Vulnerable, Can't Talking About Suicide Plant The Idea In their Minds?

If there's been a death by suicide, the topic is already on the minds of kids. So no, the idea won't be planted. And as long as it's not talked about in a way that makes it sound like a romanticized option to dealing with life's problem or as a way of reunion with the deceased, talking about suicide can in fact decrease its intensity, especially if thoughts about it were being kept secret.

So What Do You Do If You Think You Know A "Vulnerable" Youth?

If you're in a school setting, talk to your school resource staff. Be sure to let them know the specific reasons for your concern and let them take it from there. Keep your eye on that student, though, since risk level can increase at significant times like the birthday of the deceased or the death anniversary. If you're a parent, talk to your child about your concerns. Based on your conversation, you may want to get a consultation from a mental health professional to explore the issue in more depth.

If you become concerned about one of your child's peers, contact their parent or guardian and explain the reasons for your concerns. Also check out the short video, "Not My Kid" at <http://sptsnj.org> (The Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide). You'll find basic information that can help inform your responses to youth about whom you may be concerned.