

A Tip Sheet for Parents:

# MENTAL HEALTH, SUICIDE PREVENTION AND FIREARM SAFETY

This three-part resource will help you: 1) Know what behaviors to watch for in your teenagers that could point to suicide or self-harm risk; 2) Identify the steps to take if you are concerned about your child; and 3) Learn home safety steps to prevent unauthorized access to firearms or access to firearms by a person at risk for suicide.

## WARNING SIGNS TO WATCH

**Suicide most often occurs when several stressors or health issues converge to create a feeling of hopelessness or despair. Watch for the following signs and behaviors in your teen:**

- Talks about killing themselves, feeling hopeless or having no reason to live.
- Expresses being a burden to others, feeling trapped or experiencing unbearable pain.
- Appears depressed, anxious, disinterested, irritable, humiliated or agitated, or suddenly appears to have rapidly improved after previously displaying those moods.
- Increases use of alcohol or drugs.
- Withdraws from activities and isolates from friends and family.
- Reduces effort at school, stops trying academically or increases absences.
- Exhibits changes in sleeping or eating patterns; is always fatigued or not sleeping.
- Conducts internet searches for materials/ways for self-harm.
- Says goodbye to family or friends; gives possessions away.
- Displays aggressive behaviors.
- Makes unusual or cryptic social media posts related to the above (being a burden, saying goodbye, etc.).

## OUTREACH STEPS TO TAKE

**Don't wait – trust your gut.** If you notice changes in your teen's normal behavior, such as becoming more withdrawn, disconnecting from friends, or grades dropping, or they're just not being themselves, that's a time to connect and talk with them about their feelings and mental health and consider reaching out to a healthcare professional. Talking about mental health or suicide does not increase risk of suicide.

**Ask your teen specifically about suicide and suicidal thoughts.** Here's how: "Sometimes when people are feeling overwhelmed, they may have thoughts of suicide. Have you had those kinds of thoughts?" If your teen indicates suicidal thoughts or you are left feeling uneasy, reach out to a healthcare professional for further assessment.

**Hold all discussions in a nonjudgmental, empathetic manner.** Listening and conveying that you are here to help is more important than giving advice. Stay in regular touch with teachers and coaches, as well as your teen's friends and teammates.

**Follow up regularly and express your care and concern.** If you don't see any improvements or your child continues to struggle, seek help from a healthcare professional.

**Contact a healthcare professional.** While a mental health professional is ideal, you can also turn to your child's primary care physician or even a walk-in clinic, urgent care center or your local emergency room if you are concerned about your child's safety.

## SAFETY STEPS TO TAKE

While safe firearm storage is always important, it's imperative when you are worried about the mental health of a loved one. Decide which safe firearm storage option makes the most sense for your family.



A cable lock to prevent a gun from being loaded and fired



A gun case with an external lock



A lock box featuring a passcode or biometric access



A full-size gun safe that fits multiple firearms

### Additional Safe Storage Guidelines:

- Firearms should be stored **locked and unloaded** when not in use. Read your firearm's manual and know how to safely remove any ammunition from the firearm and its magazine.
- When possible and where permitted by law, consider storing firearms **offsite or away from the home** so they are not accessible to the person at risk.
- Store firearms **disassembled** and when possible store ammunition **separately**.
- If using a key lock, **keep the keys** on your person or inaccessible to the person at risk.
- Always **unload and securely store your firearms** immediately after returning from a hunting trip or a day at the range.
- A gun lock should be used as an **additional safety precaution** and not as a substitute for secure storage.
- **Educate everyone** in your family about firearm safety and preventing unauthorized access.

### Medicines, alcohol, chemicals and knives can also be used to harm oneself. Consider the following steps:

- Secure medicine or chemical storage cabinets with a **lock**, or consider a medicine **lock box**.
- Remove medicines, chemicals and alcohol from the home as appropriate.
- Keep keys inaccessible to the person at risk.
- Ensure all family members with access take serious precautions to re-secure items after use.

To learn more about how to talk to your children about mental health, including videos and conversation starting tips, visit Seize the Awkward ([SEIZETHEAWKWARD.ORG](https://seizetheawkward.org)).