

QuickLits: Red Flags & Warning Signs of Suicide

Red Flags v. Warning Signs of Suicide

One essential component of a comprehensive suicide prevention plan is early identification and intervention with those at risk. Toward that end, a wide range of risk “identifiers” have been circulated as “red flags” and “warning signs,” terms that have often been used interchangeably. Suicide prevention experts suggest that the goal of early identification would be better served by distinguishing between the two.

Rudd, et al. (2006) defines a ‘warning sign’ for suicide as “the earliest detectable sign that indicates heightened risk for suicide in the near-term (i.e., within minutes, hours, or days). This definition emphasizes the *immediate risk* of harm.

Red flags, on the other hand, are more general. They include situations, behaviors and characteristics that are concerning and may increase risk for a negative outcome. And although suicide risk *may* be present, red flags alone do not suggest imminent risk.

Red Flags

Common red flags include:

- Loss of a relationship
- Death of a loved one
- Diagnosis of a terminal illness
- Loss of financial security
- Loss of employment
- Physical/sexual abuse
- Change in behavior, appetite, sleeping habits or physical appearance
- Declining performance in school or job
- Physical or emotional withdrawal
- Self-injurious behavior (e.g., cutting)
- Untreated/undertreated mental illness

Warning Signs

The American Association of Suicidology (AAS) lists the following as warning signs of acute risk:

- Threatening to hurt or kill him or herself, or talking of wanting to hurt or kill him/herself; and/or,
- Looking for ways to kill him/herself by seeking access to firearms, available pills, or other means; and/or,
- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide, when these actions are out of the ordinary.

If observed, seek help as soon as possible by contacting a mental health professional or calling 1-800-273-TALK (8255) for a referral.

AAS lists these additional warning signs:

- Increased **substance** (alcohol or drug) **use**
- No reason for living; no sense of **purpose** in life
- **Anxiety**, agitation, unable to sleep or sleeping all the time
- Feeling **trapped** - like there’s no way out
- **Hopelessness**
- **Withdrawal** from friends, family and society
- Rage, uncontrolled **anger**, seeking revenge
- Acting **reckless** or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking
- Dramatic **mood changes**.

If you are worried about someone, get help. Consult a professional to find out more about what you can do to help someone stay safe.

In a crisis, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **800-273- TALK (8255)** your local hospital emergency room, or 911.



www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

- Rudd, M. D., Berman, A. L., Joiner Jr, T. E., Nock, M. K., Silverman, M. M., Mandrusiak, M., Van Orden, K., & Witte, T. (2006). Warning signs for suicide: Theory, research & clinical applications. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 36(3), 255-262.
- Suicidology.org. N/A. “Know the warning signs.” Retrieved May 26, 2011 from www.suicidology.org.