

Warning Signs a Child or Teen May Be Struggling

A Quick Guide for Parents and Caring Adults

Sometimes emotional pain is hidden beneath everyday life. Many children and teens who struggle with hopelessness or suicidal thoughts do not directly say what they are feeling.

Learning to recognize warning signs can help you start an important conversation before someone reaches a crisis point.

Not every person will show the same signs, and one sign alone does not necessarily mean someone is suicidal. However, when several warning signs appear together or represent a noticeable change in behavior, it may be time to check in and ask how they are really doing.

Verbal Warning Signs

Sometimes people communicate distress through the words they use.

Listen for statements such as:

- Talking about feeling hopeless or trapped
- Saying things like “I wish I could disappear”
- Saying “Everyone would be better off without me”
- Talking frequently about death or wanting to escape
- Saying “Nothing matters anymore”
- Talking about feeling like a burden to others
- Making statements about being tired of life

Even comments that seem casual or joking can be worth paying attention to.

Emotional Warning Signs

Emotional shifts can sometimes signal deeper internal struggles.

Watch for changes such as:

- Persistent sadness or hopelessness
- Sudden emotional withdrawal
- Increased irritability, anger, or frustration
- Loss of interest in activities they once enjoyed
- Feeling numb or emotionally disconnected
- Expressing intense shame, embarrassment, or worthlessness
- Mood swings that seem unusually intense

These emotions may not always be obvious, but consistent changes can signal that someone is struggling internally.

Behavioral Warning Signs

Changes in behavior are often the most noticeable indicators that something is wrong.

Possible behavioral signs include:

- Withdrawal from friends or family
- Changes in sleep patterns (sleeping much more or much less)
- Significant changes in appetite or eating habits
- Giving away personal belongings
- Risk-taking behavior or reckless actions
- Self-harm behaviors
- Major personality changes or loss of motivation
- Declining school performance or loss of focus

A sudden shift in behavior, especially when combined with emotional distress, may indicate that someone needs support.

Situations That Can Increase Risk

Certain life events or experiences can increase emotional vulnerability, especially for children and teens.

Examples include:

- Bullying or social isolation
- Major embarrassment or public humiliation
- Breakups or friendship conflicts
- Academic pressure or failure
- Family conflict or instability
- Loss of a loved one
- Exposure to suicide in peers, media, or community

These experiences can feel overwhelming to young people, even if adults might see them differently.

What to Do If You Notice These Signs

If you notice several warning signs or sense that something is wrong, the most important step is to begin a conversation.

You do not need perfect words. Simply showing that you care and are willing to listen can make a powerful difference.

You might say something like:

“I’ve noticed you seem more withdrawn lately, and I just want to check in. How are you really doing?”

or

“You don’t have to go through hard things alone. If something is weighing on you, I’m here to listen.”

If someone expresses thoughts of suicide or self-harm, take those words seriously and seek professional help right away.

When Immediate Help Is Needed

If someone is in immediate danger or talking about harming themselves:

Call or text 988
The Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

Or contact local emergency services.

You do not have to handle this alone.

Final Encouragement

If you are reading this because you are worried about someone, your concern already matters.

Noticing small changes, asking honest questions, and offering a listening ear can interrupt loneliness and help someone feel seen again.

One caring conversation can make a life-changing difference.