

Twelve Must-Know Myths about Suicidal Clients (Adapted from Rosenthal, 2003)

Myth 1: Suicidal people don't give warning signs.

Fact: Nearly everybody who attempts or dies by suicide communicates his or her intent. The person may talk about suicide, repeatedly joke about it, write about it, place messages on Internet chat rooms, or even draw pictures related to death. Others give away prized possessions. Research indicates that up to 75 to 80 percent of suicidal people give warning signs.

Myth 2: Suicide occurs around the holidays.

Fact: If a suicide occurs on a holiday, it is more likely to get media attention. Overall, however, December is usually the lowest month for suicide. In fact, some suicidologists have noted that all major holidays have a lower rate of suicide than other days of the year.

Myth 3: Suicide occurs more frequently in the dark, dreary days of winter.

Fact: Most suicides occur in the spring, with rates in May generally being the highest.

Myth 4: Suicide is primarily a teenage problem.

Fact: Indeed, teen suicide is a problem. The rate of teen suicide is about three times what it was in the 1960s. However, the suicide rate in women continues to rise until it peaks at about age 51 and then it plateaus. In men, the suicide rate keeps increasing with age. The rate of geriatric suicide (ages 65 and older) is nearly three times the rate of the general population.

Myth 5: Most people leave a suicide note that explains the nature of their act.

Fact: Only 15 to 25 percent of those who die by suicide leave a note. Moreover, these documents often tell us little about why the person decided to take his or her own life.

Myth 6: Clients who live in big cities are under more stress and are more likely to kill themselves.

Fact: The suicide rate is clearly higher in sparsely populated rural areas. Densely populated regions have rates that are much lower than those of regions that have fewer people per square mile.

Myth 7: Media stories about suicide and the economy do not affect the suicide rate.

Fact: Researchers have known for a long time that the suicide rate goes down during extended newspaper strikes. When a famous person dies by suicide the rate increases at a statistically significant level. Suicide is also a good barometer of the economy. In troubled economic times, such as the Great Depression of 1929, the suicide rate skyrocketed.

Myth 8: The grief surrounding a suicide is just like any other grief.

Fact: In most cases survivors (i.e., those who have lost a friend or loved one to suicide) have a tougher time coping with grief. When an individual dies by suicide, the survivors cannot blame a virus or a drunk driver. Suicide prevention centers often provide special survivors of suicide groups to help those who are grieving deal with the loss.

Myth 9: The suicide rate goes up in times of war.

Fact: In reality, the suicide rate plummets during times of war.

Myth 10: Never ask a person if he or she is suicidal as you could put the idea in his or her head.

Fact: This is one of the most pernicious myths. It is important to make it a point to ask each of your clients if he or she is suicidal.

Myth 11: Once a person's depression lifts, the situation isn't as dangerous.

Fact: It is not uncommon for individuals to attempt suicide as their depression begins lifting, as they begin having increased energy. Often changes in vegetative symptoms (e.g., energy, appetite) occur prior to changes in mood. As such, the point at which depressive symptoms begin lifting (e.g., after beginning antidepressant medication usage) may be a high risk period.

Myth 12: Don't bother giving the suicidal individual the number of the local suicide prevention hotline if the client insists he or she won't call it.

Fact: Many people who insist they would never call a hotline do decide to make the call after all. Make it a point to give all your suicidal clients the number of a suicide prevention hotline.