



# THE 13 SUICIDE WARNING SIGNS

A Guide for Managers



WORKPLACE MENTAL  
HEALTH INSTITUTE  
Peak Performance Research & Programs™

# INTRODUCTION

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It's a common myth that people who really want to kill themselves don't tell anyone. **The evidence is that 8 of out 10 people give definite warning signs of their intention to kill themselves.**

BUT - these warning signs are often given in code. So it's only after the fact that family and friends are able to look back and recognise the person's comments and actions had a deeper meaning. But at the time, the person might have hidden the real meaning of their words or actions.

For example, a person might have made some jokes about suicide which at the time everyone took to be black humour, but after they suicided, we realise it was a warning sign. Or maybe the person phoned to say hello, and told their friend how important they were to them, and thanked them for everything they have done for them. At the time the friend might have thought it was nice they showed appreciation, but only after they suicided did they realise they were saying goodbye.

Sometimes we hear that a person threatening suicide is just crying out for attention, and they won't really do it.

This too is fiction. If a person is threatening suicide, they are clearly in distress about their situation, and we should take action to help, regardless of whether we think they are serious or

not, or what we think the level of risk is. If a person is crying out for help - let's help them!

**In fact, most people who have suicided, did reach out for help at some point.**

Our response can make a big difference in what happens next for the person. Some professionals become dismissive when they hear the same person threaten suicide again and again, however we should make sure to take every threat seriously, because we never know when the person might take action.

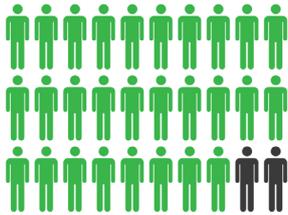
Before we go through the list, I just want to remind you that these signs are not a checklist, and if a person displays only one or two out of the ten, it does not mean the person is safe. Don't assume it's nothing to worry about.

But also bear in mind that the existence of these behaviours does not mean the person IS suicidal - they are just warning signs that should ring alarm bells for you to find out more information.

We should be especially mindful if these warning signs are unusual for the person, and indicate a change in behaviour.

# THE RISK OF SUICIDE

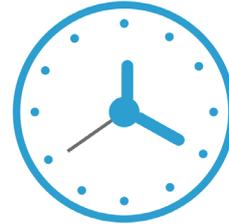
The World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that:



Every year  
**800,000**  
suicide  
which is  
roughly



**1** death  
every



**40**  
seconds

Suicide is in the  
**Top 20**

leading causes of death  
globally for all ages

AGE 15-44

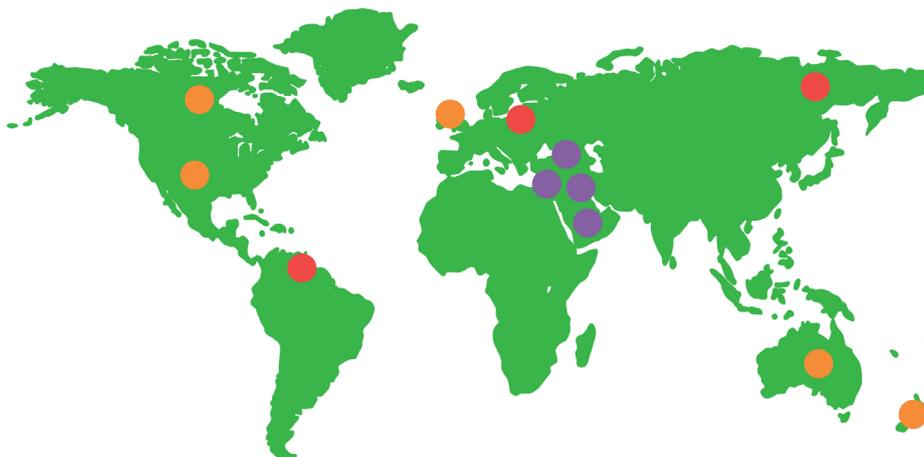
AGE 10-24



**In 2012**

the average  
suicide rate  
globally was

**11.4 for every  
100,000 people**



● High Rate

**South East Asia** region  
has highest rate of suicide

**South Korea** has highest  
reported suicide rate,  
followed by **Guyana** and  
**Lithuania**. All had over 3  
times the average rate.

● Lowest Rate

And the country with the  
lowest reported suicide  
rate was **Saudi Arabia**,  
followed by **Syria, Lebanon**  
and **Kuwait**.

● Average Rate

**Australia, New Zealand,**  
**Canada** are about average,  
**US** slightly higher, **UK** slightly  
lower than average.

# RISK FACTORS

## SEX



More females attempt suicide but men are up to **4 times** more likely to take their life.



**Why?** Men choose more lethal methods of suicide that once started can be difficult to stop or call for help.

## AGE



### Young people:

Those aged 15 - 25 have higher suicide risk, due to number of factors including biochemical changes in the body, social changes, life transitions.



### Older people:

Males aged 85+ and women aged 80-84 have highest suicide rates.

## MARITAL STATUS



People who are **divorced, widowed, single** are a higher risk

Those **living alone** or **separated** are more vulnerable

## OCCUPATION



**Doctors, veterinarians, pharmacists, chemists** and **farmers** have higher than average suicide rates

## LGBTQI



One of the highest rates of suicide attempts  
Face **social pressures, bullying** that can lead to depression.

## CHRONIC PAIN/ TERMINAL ILLNESS



May feel **hopeless** about the future, increasing risk of suicide

## MIGRATION



People who've moved from **rural to an urban area**, or different region or country are more at risk.

Can experience depression, loneliness, anxiety over trying to fit in with new culture

## REFUGEES & ASYLUM SEEKERS



May be **separated** from or have lost loved ones, resulting in depression and thoughts of suicide

## MINORITY GROUPS



Can feel **isolated** from general community, at the same time don't feel a strong connection to their cultural identity

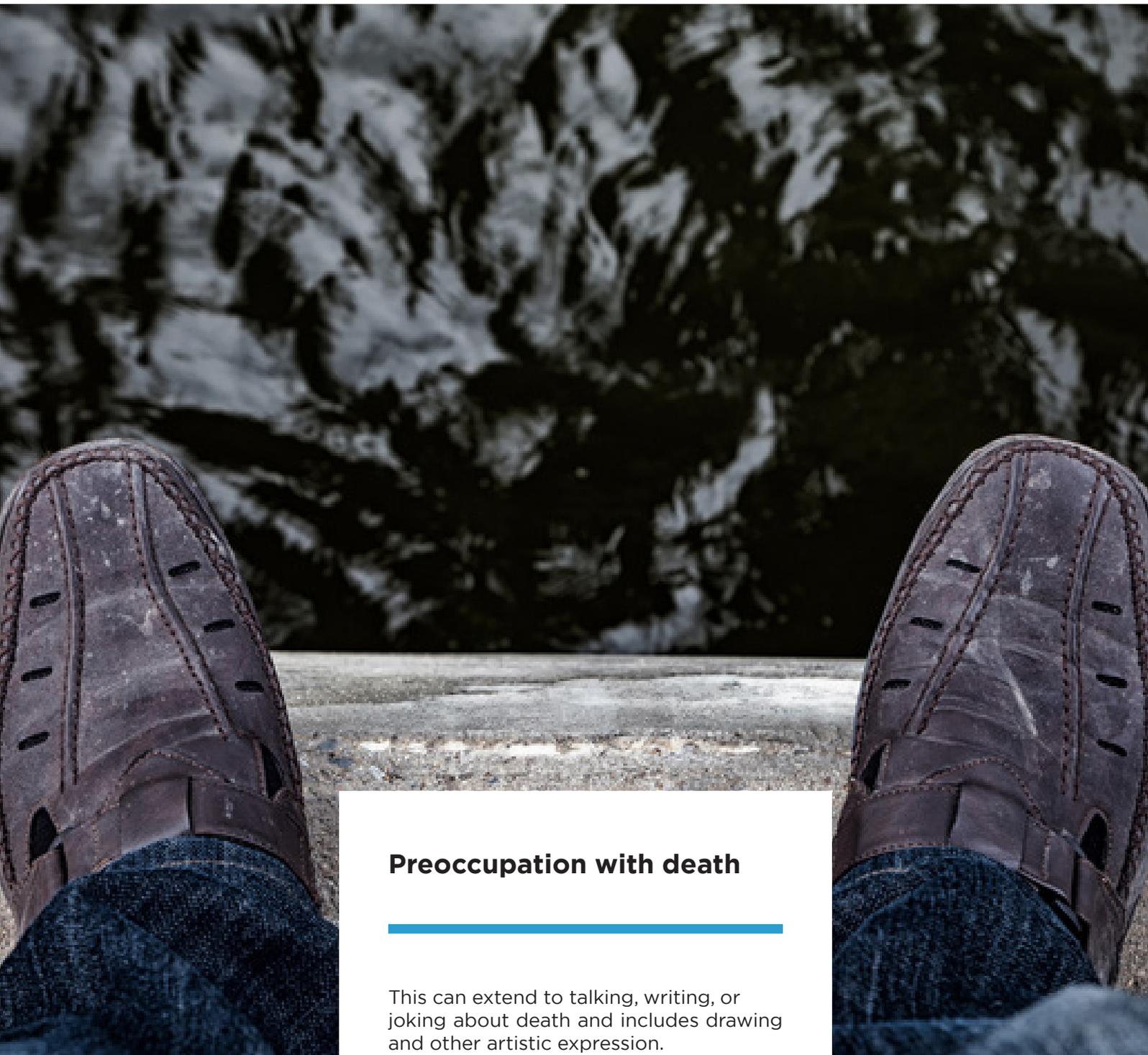
## ABORIGINAL & TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS



One of highest suicide rates in world at **25.5 per 100,000**

Males 25-29 four times more likely to suicide than non-Indigenous males

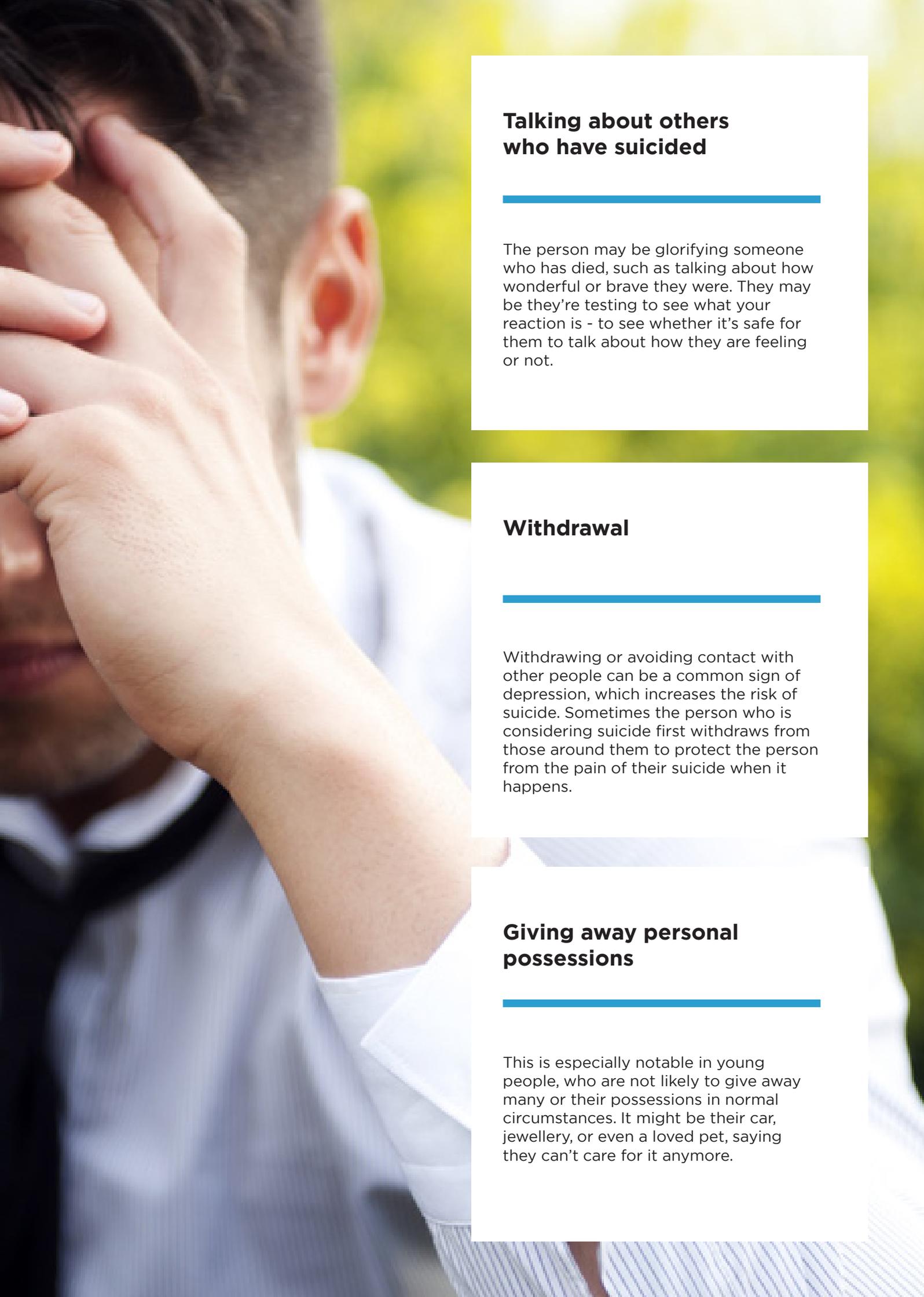
# 13 SUICIDE WARNING SIGNS



## **Preoccupation with death**

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This can extend to talking, writing, or joking about death and includes drawing and other artistic expression.



## Talking about others who have suicided

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The person may be glorifying someone who has died, such as talking about how wonderful or brave they were. They may be they're testing to see what your reaction is - to see whether it's safe for them to talk about how they are feeling or not.

## Withdrawal

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Withdrawing or avoiding contact with other people can be a common sign of depression, which increases the risk of suicide. Sometimes the person who is considering suicide first withdraws from those around them to protect the person from the pain of their suicide when it happens.

## Giving away personal possessions

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This is especially notable in young people, who are not likely to give away many of their possessions in normal circumstances. It might be their car, jewellery, or even a loved pet, saying they can't care for it anymore.

## Loss of interest in activities they previously enjoyed

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Suddenly giving up sports, hobbies, or socialising is another sign of depression and hopelessness. This can be very hard for the person because they no longer feel any meaning in doing those things. They might say “what’s the point?”

## Saying goodbye in a meaningful way

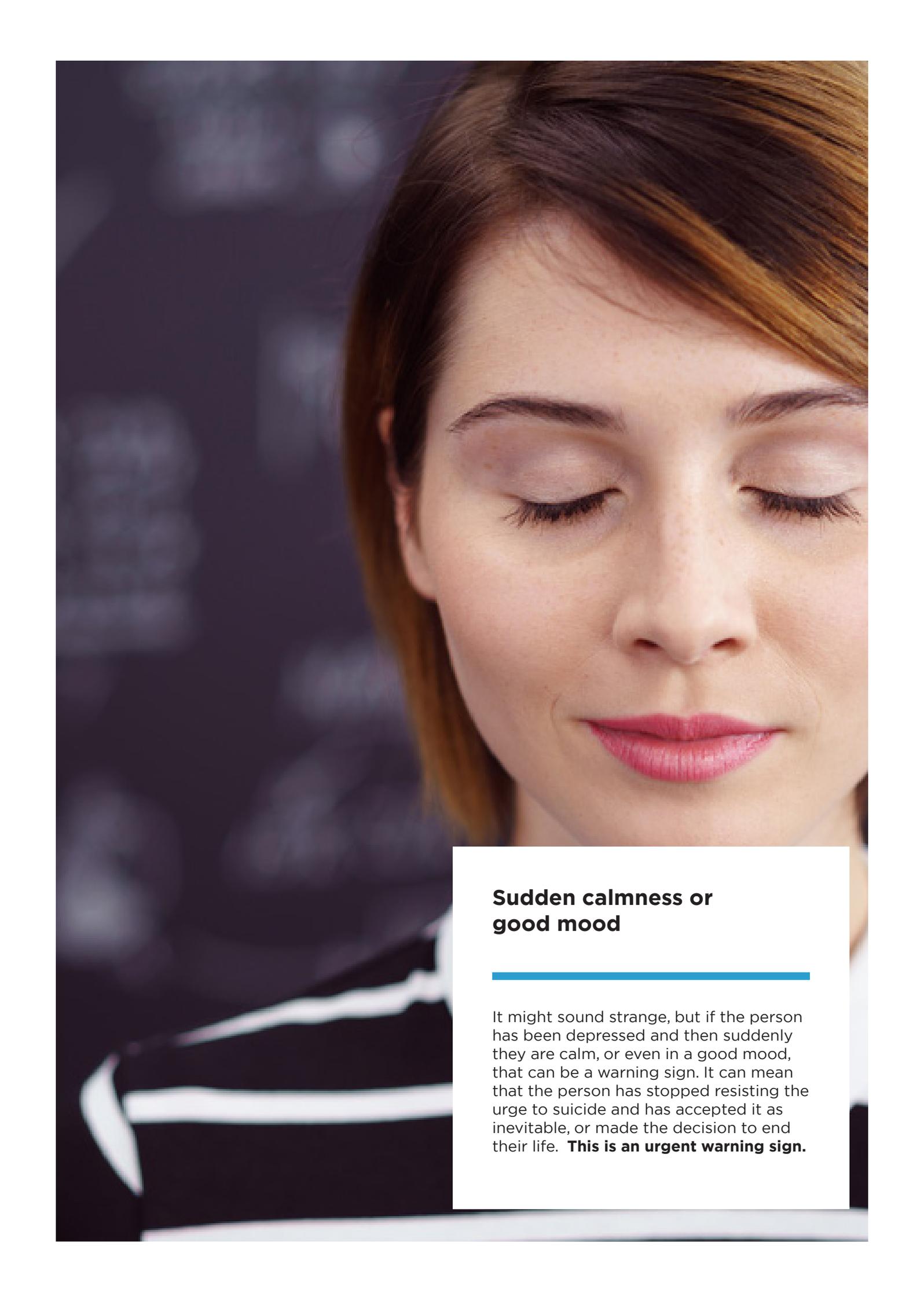
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It might be a phone call, a letter or simply extra hugs. Often people will have ‘deep and meaningful’ conversations and thank the person for all they’ve done for them.

## Putting affairs in order

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The person may start putting their affairs in order and begin making arrangements for after their death. They might write or update their will, sell property, or take out life insurance. **This is particularly unusual in younger people and a serious warning sign.** Listen for statements like “If anything happens to me...” or “When I’m gone...”



## Sudden calmness or good mood

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It might sound strange, but if the person has been depressed and then suddenly they are calm, or even in a good mood, that can be a warning sign. It can mean that the person has stopped resisting the urge to suicide and has accepted it as inevitable, or made the decision to end their life. **This is an urgent warning sign.**

## Depression

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Depression itself is a warning sign. Depression is the most commonly diagnosed disorder in those who have died by suicide. It can be hard to tell the difference between depression on its own and when a person is depressed and suicidal as well, so it's important to watch for any other signs and changes in their mood.



## Deliberate self harm

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Deliberate self-harm can sometimes be used as an outlet for depression or trauma. I want to be very clear here, that the intention of self harm is not to die. People do it for a range of reasons, but it is not usually a suicidal act. However, it is an important warning sign, and one to observe carefully.

Oftentimes, people who harm themselves deliberately are using this as a coping mechanism for depression. If a well-meaning person attempts to stop the person from harming themselves before the person has developed other coping strategies, they may feel like suicide is the only other option.

## Risk-taking behaviour

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Behaviour like reckless driving, drug use or gambling can mean the person no longer cares for their well-being and is numb to their emotions. Sometimes they are making an attempt to feel something or anything besides their pain. It can also mean the person has not fully decided to end their life, but they are hoping the decision will be made for them through an accident. **When this kind of behaviour is out of character for the person, it is a serious warning sign.**



## Aggression or revenge-seeking

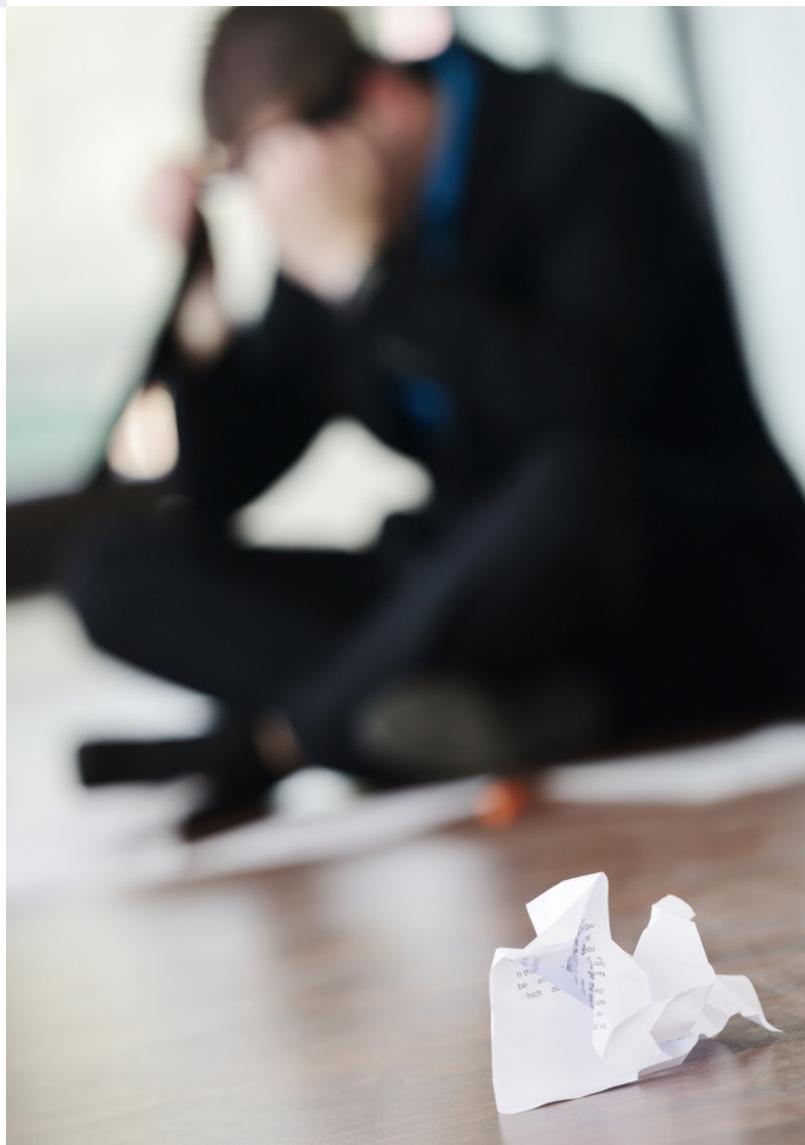
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The person may seek to 'right' any perceived injustices towards themselves before ending their life, or they may want to hurt others by ending their own life to 'show them'. Sometimes people will lash out at those who try to help them in an attempt to isolate themselves from others. Afterwards, the person will often feel guilty about what they have said.

## Previous suicide attempt

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This is one of the strongest indicators that someone will attempt suicide again. If the person's mental state and sources of stress have not changed since the last attempt, there is a high likelihood they will attempt again. Of course there are also people who have been depressed or attempted suicide in the past and have recovered fully. **If you know that the person has attempted before, you should be extra alert.**



# Top 5 Myths & Reducing the Risk

## Top 5 Suicide Myths

### MYTH

**“People who suicide are weak or cowards.”**

### MYTH

**“People who suicide are brave and honourable.”**

### FACT

The person who is considering suicide is suffering immensely, which takes great strength to bear. Suicide is not an ‘easy way out’, physically or emotionally.

### FACT

While some cultures do consider suicide an honourable act in certain situations, we also must be careful not to glamourise or glorify suicide. For that reason there are strict regulations about how suicide should be reported in the media.

## MYTH

**“People who suicide are all mentally unwell.”**

## FACT

90% of people who suicide are found to have a mental illness, but 10% do not. Some of those people may not have a mental illness, but perhaps did have a sudden loss (job, finances, relationship, loved one). Others may have come to the decision to take their life after much consideration of their circumstances. For example, perhaps the person has reached an age where they feel they do not wish to be a burden on others, and will end it their way, or perhaps they have a terminal illness. These are examples of cases where the person is not mentally unwell.

## MYTH

**“People who suicide are selfish.”**

## FACT

Usually when people think this, it is because they are focussing on the feelings of the friends and family left behind. What we know is that the person thinking about suicide is in such a degree of suffering that they consider the pain of living to be worse than the pain caused to friends and family. In many cases the person feels like a burden to others and thinks ‘they’ll be better off without me’. Suicide is not a selfish act.

## MYTH

**“People who suicide want to die.”**

## FACT

The majority of people who have attempted suicide, say that they did not want to die. But they did not want to continue living with the suffering they were in. Most people also state they are glad they did not die.

# Protective Factors

THE FOLLOWING FACTORS HAVE BEEN SHOWN TO REDUCE THE RISK OF SUICIDE:

## FEELING CONNECTED TO FAMILY, COMMUNITY, SOCIAL NETWORKS



The person may be less depressed as a result of these connections, and they may also feel a responsibility to them, or a desire not to let them down or hurt them.

## SPIRITUALITY AND SENSE OF PURPOSE



These can provide the person with a reason for continuing their life, as well as a sense of being connected

## CARING FOR CHILDREN



The responsibility of caring for children may protect the person from suicide because they do not want to leave their children without a carer.

## BELIEF THAT SUICIDE IS WRONG



While this belief can cause some anxiety for the person considering suicide, it may also make it less likely that they will follow through with any suicidal thoughts.

## SIGNIFICANT OTHER



Having someone special can help a person feel less lonely and isolated, and therefore reduce suicidal thoughts. Also, the person may not want to hurt their significant other by their suicide.

## RESILIENCE AND PROBLEM SOLVING



The ability to bounce back from difficult situations and to problem solve challenges that life brings can reduce the risk of suicide, as the person is able to find other solutions.

## NO ACCESS TO MEANS



If the person cannot access the items they need to suicide in the way they choose, then suicide is less likely to occur. For example, if the person thinks that using a gun would be best, but they cannot access a gun, then suicide is less likely.

## PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH



Good physical and mental health reduces the risk of suicide because the person is less likely to have a reason to want to end their life.

## EARLY IDENTIFICATION & TREATMENT FOR MENTAL ILLNESS



Generally speaking, the earlier mental illness is treated, the better the outcome, which makes suicide less likely.



**Safeguard your organisation's  
mental health.**

Contact us to discuss how.

**(02) 8935 3885**

**admin@wmhi.com.au**

If you're concerned that you or  
someone you know may be at risk of  
suicide, please call (in Australia) the  
Suicide Call Back Service: **1300 659 467**

For international assistance, visit this site:  
<https://www.betterhelp.com/gethelpnow/>



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