



When Covering Suicide Prevention in Firearm Classes

A Guide for Firearm Instructors

Frequently Asked Questions

1. The training video advises storing guns away from home if you're concerned a family member is suicidal. Won't they just use something else if they can't use a gun?

Some will, some won't. But almost every other method is less lethal than a firearm, so there's a greater chance the person won't die if they do attempt. Also, other methods allow time for rescue and give the attempter time to change their mind mid-attempt. More attempters stop mid-attempt than carry through.

2. Won't a suicidal person eventually figure out a way to die?

Suicidal feelings often pass over time. Studies that follow people over many years have found that over 90% of those who survive a suicide attempt do not go on to kill themselves later. This includes studies of people who made a very serious attempt, like jumping in front of a train.

3. What are some signs that a person is at risk for suicide?

- They're struggling with depression, substance abuse, or other mental health problems. Suspect depression when a person is much more sad, angry, or disinterested in life than usual; they sleep and/or eat much more or less than usual; they stop paying attention to personal hygiene; they lack energy, can't concentrate; can't make decisions, feel worthless and guilty; and especially if they become focused on death.
- They say things like "Things will never get better," "I don't see any way out of this," or "No one would miss me if I were gone."
- They're dealing with a painful crisis (like a relationship break-up, arrest, eviction, job loss, school suspension), especially if multiple crises are going on at once.
- Remember that teenagers in particular may show no warning signs. A wise precaution is for owners to lock up all guns if there's a child or teenager in the home.

4. This is a mental health issue. Why is this being covered in a firearm class?

We all have a stake in protecting families and friends from suicide, and we don't need to be mental health experts to do that. Instructors have a particular stake in bringing down the number of firearm deaths. Nationally, there are about 500 deaths from unintentional discharges and over **23,000** from firearm suicide. If we're only focused on preventing gun accidents, we're ignoring the #1 type of firearm death.

5. How do you start a conversation with a friend about holding onto their guns while they are going through a rough time?

Clark Aposhian, a firearm instructor and chair of the Utah Shooting Sports Council, urges people to be up front. "Go over to their house, kind of like a mini intervention at their door. Put your arm around them and say, 'I'm worried about you. Let me babysit your guns for a while.'" Often the friend will appreciate your being there for them. In states where state laws pose a barrier to holding onto a non-relative's guns, you can urge them to put their guns into storage or offer to change the combination on their gun safe or hold onto the keys until they're feeling better.

6. Suicide is a sensitive subject—I'm concerned about making my students uncomfortable.

It's true this is a difficult subject, but thoughtful conversations about hard topics can produce good outcomes, in this case even save lives. A student might see our video in your class, for example, and talk to her newly-divorced brother about letting her hold onto his guns temporarily, until his depression lifts. Your class may help save a life without your even knowing it. That said, it is very important to us to ensure our materials are useful and respectful—please let us know what your students think!

7. My students have cleared a background check. They're not at risk for suicide.

Most of your students probably aren't at risk of suicide; but a background check doesn't tell you that. A few will become suicidal in their lifetime, more will have a family member at risk, and nearly every one of them knows someone who will attempt suicide. Suicide prevention is everyone's business.

8. What do I say to a gun owner who keeps a gun at home to protect the family and is worried a family member is suicidal?

Protecting the people we love means knowing the biggest threats to their safety. This can change over time. When a person is struggling with a mental health or drug/alcohol problem, suicide is usually the far bigger risk than being attacked. Nationally, suicides outnumber homicides almost 2-to-1 (6-to-1 among white Americans)—and that's on average. Clearly the risks tip even more in the direction of suicide when a person's mental health is suffering. Gun owners can make the wisest gun storage decisions when they weigh their own family's risk of attack with their risk of suicide.

9. Suicide is a personal choice. Who am I to intervene?

Often we picture a person incapacitated by terminal disease or old age when we think about suicide. However, those 75 and older account for only 8% of all suicides nationwide, and people with terminal illnesses comprise less than 10%. Last year, 10,000 teens and 20-somethings killed themselves in the U.S.—far too young an age to give up on life. Some people attempt suicide after a lot of deliberation and are virtually certain life is no longer worth living. But most are ambivalent, and many attempt during a crisis. In one study, people who attempted suicide were asked when they first started thinking about making that attempt. 48% said within 10 minutes of attempting. Often people who have survived serious attempts say something like: "The moment I jumped I said to myself, 'What did I just do? I don't want to die.'"

10. If suicide attempts are often unplanned, how can they be prevented?

Take action upstream. For example, say one of your students has a teenaged son who has dropped out of school and gotten involved in drugs. His son might not be suicidal today; but next week after he's arrested for drug use or his girlfriend breaks up with him, he might rapidly become so. Temporarily storing guns away from home or taking steps to reduce access to guns until things are back on track is like keeping the car keys from a friend who has been drinking.

11. How else can my students help a loved one at risk for suicide?

Your students can show support, listen, give the person hope that things can improve, and urge them to get professional help. If they've already tried a professional and it didn't help, urge them to try someone else; sometimes it's a matter of finding the right fit. The Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-TALK (8255) and is available 24/7 to both suicidal people and those seeking to help a loved one. Let your students know it is ok to directly ask the person they're worried about if they've been thinking about suicide. Those who are actively suicidal are best protected by not being left alone until they are feeling better.

For additional information or materials contact:

Safer Homes Collaborative
4633 World Parkway Circle
Saint Louis, Missouri 63134
314.516.8454

saferhomescollaborative.org

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