



Safer Homes Collaborative

Gun Owners Preventing Suicide: Frequently Asked Questions

1. 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.

2. This is a mental health issue. Why is the Safer Homes Collaborative targeting gun owners for suicide prevention?

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. Gun owners have a particular role to play in preventing suicide. 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.

3. Won't a suicidal person just use something else if they can't get a gun?

Sometimes, yes. But almost every other method is less lethal than a firearm so there's a greater chance the person won't die in their attempt. Also, other methods allow time for rescue or give the ambivalent attempter some time to change their mind mid-attempt.

4. If a suicidal person substitutes another method and doesn't die, won't they eventually figure out a way to kill themselves later?

Suicidal feelings often pass over time. Studies that follow people over many years have found that roughly 90% of those who survive a suicide attempt do not go on to die by suicide, including those who made a very serious attempt, like jumping in front of a train.

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 offending a gun owner or making them feel uncomfortable.

It's true this is a difficult subject, but it's also true that thoughtful conversations about hard topics can produce good outcomes, in this case even save lives. A gun owner might see a

poster or brochure in your store, for example, and talk to his newly-divorced brother about letting him hold onto his guns until his deep depression lifts. You may have just helped save a life without your even knowing it.

7. Suicide is a personal choice – it’s your right to end your life. Who am I to intervene if someone doesn’t want to live anymore?

Suicide is certainly a personal choice. Some people attempt suicide after a lot of deliberation and are virtually certain life is no longer worth living. But many attempt during a crisis and most are ambivalent. Over half of attempters report less than an hour passed between deciding on suicide and making the attempt, according to a number of studies. Often people who 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...’” Also, thousands of people in their teens and twenties kill themselves each year in the U.S. – too young an age to give up on life.

8. I cleared a background check. I’m not at risk for suicide.

Most gun owners 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.

9. Does relocating the guns for a while *always* work?

Temporarily reducing access to firearms and other lethal means is only part of the broader suicide prevention plan. Those considered actively suicidal are best protected by not being left alone until they are feeling better. Getting professional help and the support of other family and friends is strongly advised. Help is available 24/7. If you or someone you know is in emotional crisis **call** the National Suicide Prevention Hotline 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or **text** the Crisis Line 741-741.

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

Take action upstream. For example, say your teenaged son who has dropped out of school and gotten involved in drugs. Your 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. What do I say to someone who keeps a gun at home for self-defense but is worried about someone at home who’s going through a rough time?

It depends on how that gun is stored. If a gun owner’s loved one at home (or with keys to their home) is going through a rough time, they may want to re-evaluate the accessibility of firearms to that person. Suicide may be the bigger threat that the gun owner has to guard against in the short term, until the situation improves.

For additional information or materials contact:

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