

# Suicide, Self-Injury & Depression

Like Dorothy on her journey down the yellow brick road who comes in contact with the Lion, Tin Man and Scarecrow, college students are likely to come in contact with students who are struggling with Suicide, Depression and Self-Injury. While all three share some relation to each other, they also each have their individual distinction.

**Depression and suicide** are the most closely related. Students who experience suicidal thoughts often experience depressive symptoms. These symptoms can include difficulty sleeping or eating (either more or less than normal), a lack of interest in activities that they usually enjoyed (going to the movies, hanging out with friends) and general feelings of unhappiness and hopelessness for a better future. While students can be depressed without feelings of suicide (often described as a more lethargic unhappiness or dysthymia), it is rare for a student to experience suicidal thoughts without depression.

The degree to which a student experiences suicide is important to understand. For **low suicide experiences**, students experience fleeting thoughts of wanting their pain and the frustrations of everyday life to end. These feelings and thoughts may not contain any plan for the student to kill themselves or, if there is a plan, the plan is vague (*someday I may just start walking at night and never come back*), non-lethal (*I'm going to take 5 or 6 aspirin and go to sleep*) or far in the future (*sometimes I think about just ending my life when I finish college*). Students who experience low suicide experiences need to talk with a professional counselor before these thoughts increase.

Other students may have **moderate suicidal thoughts**. These students spend time thinking, dreaming and planning about how they will kill themselves. There is a more serious content and tone to their suicidal talk. There are often feelings of hopelessness and sadness about their current life and the direction it is heading. While there is not a current date and method expressed for when they will take their life, they are putting together plans to narrow down this information. A student may say, *"I'm sad all the time and I don't see things changing. I've been thinking more about crashing my car when I'm out driving at night. I don't know what to do."*

Students with **severe suicidal thoughts** have a plan, date and time for when they are going to kill themselves. They are not safe to leave alone and have often become so hopeless and full of pain they see the only relief from their predicament is through suicide. They have often struggled with their pain for quite some time and now have a sense of inevitability about their decision to kill themselves. They often write goodbye notes to their friends, give away their personal belongings and reduce any obstacles that might get in the way of their choice to die (hoarding pills, obtaining a firearm, collecting a rope and finding a place to hang themselves from). A student may say, *"I'm done. I won't be here tomorrow. I just wanted to let you know."*

**Suicide isn't a new concept.** The idea of ending one's life has been around for a long time. There are many reasons why college students consider suicide. In this brief article, I will set out to cover a few of them.

**Depression** can be a stifling, all-encompassing blanket settled over a person. It keeps them from seeing the world clearly---like Sylvia Plath's character Esther in the Bell Jar. The world inside the bell jar is stagnant and full of haze; from this vantage point a person with depression sees the world through this filter. It is a place they feel disconnected from. They are often acutely aware of this disconnection, but powerless to do something to change it. They have little energy and little belief that the future will be any different from the past. To borrow another imagine from The Bell Jar, the lead character sees life as a series of telephone poles and wires stretching forward in a sameness that becomes oppressive.

**Hopelessness** goes hand in hand with depression. Hopelessness is a vote of no confidence in a better tomorrow. The student becomes lethargic and sad, losing any promise or excitement that there may be a way out of their current feelings of sadness, loneliness and isolation. Hopelessness often accompanies depression and is a critical risk factor in understanding why some students commit suicide. Their logic traps them in a feedback loop that goes something like this, *“Why bother anymore? I’ve tried to get better before. What’s different now? If anything, I feel even worse. If I am going to just keep feeling this way, killing myself seems like a way to end this pain.”*

**Pain** is an essential element of why people commit suicide. For those unfamiliar with student’s who experience suicidal thoughts and plans, the desire to escape the pain is their central motive. They can’t go another day, fighting against the oppressive weight of their sorrow. Imagine the most hot, muggy humid day you can. See yourself standing next to a beautiful pool of cool water. Imagine it gets even hotter. You jump in, right? A person who commits suicide completes the act to escape their pain in the same way. You may have not sought out the pool of water if not for the oppressive heat. A student considering suicide needs hope and reassurance that they can live life free of pain.

**Trauma and loss** can also be the cause of a college student’s suicide. Sometimes the pain of living after losing someone so important to you becomes all you can think about. Trauma and loss can be powerful motivators to end one’s life. They feed on the hopelessness for a better future and the terror that everyday will be one that contains the same unbearable amount of pain that today holds.

**Attention seeking** can be another reason a college student completes a suicide. Perhaps the intent of the suicide act was not death. Perhaps a student took pills in front of other students or jumped off a building that she thought wasn’t high enough to end her life. The attention a student seeks is typically related to feelings of hopelessness (an irrational fear that they will feel like this forever) or a desire to have others understand that they are in pain; it is a cry for help, so to speak. The danger with attention seeking behavior is it often gets taken too far or an unforeseen variable brings the student closer to death than they may have wished. It could be a cut that goes to deep or a car crash that is more serious than they imagined. In the end, whatever the motive or intention of the student, a suicide has still occurred.

**Substance abuse and risk taking behavior** can also lead to suicide in either an intentional or accidental manner. Students engage in risk-taking behaviors that put their lives in danger. Sometimes, not wanting to live enough in a dangerous situation is exactly all it takes to complete a suicide. It could be consuming alcohol and pills without a care for their interactions or consequences. It could be riding a motorcycle late at night and flipping the headlights off on a dark stretch of road. Again, students are in pain and feel hopeless for a better future.

**Self-Injury** involves a student who cuts themselves with razors, straight pins or other sharp objects they make or find in their lives. These cuts can be superficial or deep and dangerous, depending on what their intentions are. Some students also hurt themselves with fire, or by punching themselves or hitting themselves with a stick or other object. Students hurt themselves for a variety of reasons. Some students hurt themselves because it helps them feel better about their internal pain for a short time. Others engage in this behavior as a cry for help with the hope that others can talk to them about how they are feeling.

Self-injury is not always related to suicide or depression. It can become an obsession for some students, a bad habit or a coping mechanism they developed in high school. It is understandable that other students become concerned a student is thinking of killing herself when she cuts her arm with a razor. However, suicide is rarely the desired outcome for those who self-injure.

The best way to help a college student that struggles with depression, suicide or self-injury is to talk to them directly about what they are feeling and try to provide an opportunity for them to share with you their fears and worries. Counselors, social workers and psychologists who work on a college campus are trained to help students with all of these issues and can provide a supportive place to have these discussions.