

Protective Factors

Certain factors are thought to protect youth and reduce their risk of suicide.

Age of change

The behaviour of children begins to change when they reach the pre-adolescent and adolescent stages. They may become more impulsive, or moody and even belligerent. This is a natural part of growing up. Developmentally, adolescents

begin to pull away from parents in a search for their own identity and many struggle through a dependence-independence crisis. Physically, adolescents may grow 15 percent in both height and weight and appear to look more like adults than children.

However, while their bodies are maturing, the same cannot be said of the adolescent brain. Research in neuroscience indicates that adolescence is a chaotic time for the brain. Different regions are developing on different time tables and a number of neurotransmitter levels are increasing and declining. Additionally, the release of sex hormones is changing the architecture of the brain. The teenage brain is less able to control emotions and its ability to make good judgments and control impulses is compromised. All these factors may put a youth at higher risk of suicide.

Protective factors

Fortunately, most teenagers emerge from this tumultuous time with few or no permanent scars or thoughts of suicide. Research has shown that certain factors help protect and strengthen youth during this developmental stage.

External factors

- Family cohesion, e.g., involvement through shared interests and emotional support.
- Good relationships with other youth and adults.
- Academic achievement.
- Stable environment.
- Social integration and opportunities to participate in activities.
- Responsibilities for other people or pets.

- Adequate care for substance use, physical and mental disorders.
- Lack of access to means for suicidal behaviour.
- Connection to a religious community.

Internal factors

- Sense of belonging.
- Sociability, i.e., ability to be a friend.
- Love of learning.
- Perceived connectedness to school.
- Sense of worth and self-confidence.
- Self motivation.
- Help seeking and advice seeking behaviour.
- Service, i.e., gives of self in service to others or a cause.
- Life skills, e.g., good decision making, assertiveness, impulse control, coping skills, flexibility and perseverance.
- Sense of humour.
- Creativity, e.g., expresses through artistic endeavours.
- Spirituality - faith in something greater.

Building and enhancing protective factors in youth

1. Help the youth build connections.

Research in the field of youth development and resiliency informs us that building connections with family, school, other adults and youth, and getting involved in community activities, are some of the most important ways to develop protective factors in a youth's life.

2. Help the youth identify their external and internal strengths by asking questions like these:

In previous difficult situations, how did you cope, what did you do? Who do you talk to when experiencing stress? How do they help? Can they help you now and in the future? Who else can help? Can you use what you have learned in other situations to help you now and in the future?

3. Help the youth create a network of support.

Develop a caring and empowering relationship with the youth. Provide support, communicate positive expectations and invite participation. Demonstrate attitudes and messages of optimism, strength and overcoming difficulties.