

As an educational professional, it is important familiarize yourself with common warning signs or red flags that can be a cause for concern in students. Red flags can be telling of a larger issue, being able to recognize these potential concerns allows you to help students access the appropriate mental health assistance they may need.

If observable behaviors do not pose an immediate threat(s), please take the following step(s):

- Contact school counselor with concerns regarding observable behaviors.
- Refer to Student Assistance Program (SAP)
- Always err on the side of caution.

Please know that the student’s counselor will most likely speak with the student privately to assess his or her risk factors and contact parents if necessary. You may decide or be asked to contact the student’s parents about the behaviors you have observed in your classroom (for reference see **Tips for Communication with Parent/Caregiver about Mental Health Concerns** on the Penn State PRO Wellness website). Please continue to report any ongoing behaviors of concern that you observe and maintain communication with the school counselor.

Read on to learn more about observable behaviors that can be red flags, risk factors and protective factors to identify and prevent suicide.

Red Flags and Warning Signs

- **Mood changes** – *Feelings of sadness, extreme mood swings or withdrawing from friends and family. Increased social isolation. Desire to be left alone.*
- **Intense feelings** – *Feelings of overwhelming fear for no reason — sometimes with a racing heart or fast breathing — or increased anxiousness, agitation, worry or fear intense enough to interfere with daily activities.*
- **Self-loathing, self-hatred** – *Feelings of worthlessness, guilt, shame and self-hatred. Feeling like a burden and rejecting praise or rewards (“Everyone would be better off without me”). ***Immediate Action Required*** Making statements about not wanting to live (i.e. to other students or directly to staff) such as “missing them when they are gone,” or “it won’t matter much longer” or statements of harming self or others.*
- **Neglect of personal appearance** – *Unusual lack of personal hygiene, sudden neglect of personal appearance and no interest in what others think of them.*
- **No hope for the future** – *Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, lack of purpose or feeling trapped (“There’s no way out”). Belief that things will never get better or change.*



Red Flags and Warning Signs *(continued)*

- **Behavior changes** – Drastic changes in behavior or personality, as well as dangerous, reckless and out-of-control self-destructive behavior. Fighting frequently, bullying, using weapons, running away, expressing a desire to badly hurt others, increased alcohol or drug use, reckless driving or unsafe sex. Taking unnecessary risks as if they have a “death wish.” ***Immediate Action Required*** Making statements about not wanting to live (i.e. to other students or directly to staff) such as “missing them when they are gone,” or “it won’t matter much longer” or statements of harming self or others.
- **Substance abuse** – Drug or alcohol use to try to cope with their feelings.
- **Physical harm** – Sometimes a mental health condition leads to self-injury, also called self-harm. This is the act of deliberately harming your own body, such as cutting or burning yourself. Children with a mental health condition also might develop suicidal thoughts or attempt suicide. ***Immediate Action Required*** Making statements about not wanting to live (i.e. to other students or directly to staff) such as “missing them when they are gone,” or “it won’t matter much longer” or statements of harming self or others.
- **Physical symptoms** – Compared with adults, children with a mental health condition might develop headaches, stomachaches or be in ‘unbearable pain’ rather than sadness or anxiety.
- **Difficulty concentrating** – Trouble focusing or sitting still, both of which might lead to poor performance in school.
- **Change in eating and sleeping habits** – A sudden loss of appetite, unexplained drastic weight loss, frequent vomiting or use of laxatives might indicate an eating disorder. (i.e., too little, too much, etc.)
- **Talking about suicide or death** – Any talk about suicide, dying or self-harm, such as “I wish I hadn’t been born,” “If I see you again...” and “I’d be better off dead.” Preoccupied with talk about death, unusual focus on dying or violence. Writing poems or stories about death. ***Immediate Action Required*** Making statements about not wanting to live (i.e. to other students or directly to staff) such as “missing them when they are gone,” or “it won’t matter much longer” or statements of harming self or others.
- **Seeking out lethal means** – Seeking access to guns, pills, knives or other objects that could be used in a suicide attempt. ***Immediate Action Required*** Making statements about not wanting to live (i.e. to other students or directly to staff) such as “missing them when they are gone,” or “it won’t matter much longer” or statements of harming self or others.
- **Getting affairs in order** – Making out a will. Giving away prized possessions or seeking long-term care for pets. ***Immediate Action Required*** Making statements about not wanting to live (i.e. to other students or directly to staff) such as “missing them when they are gone,” or “it won’t matter much longer” or statements of harming self or others.



Red Flags and Warning Signs *(continued)*

- **Saying goodbye** – Unusual or unexpected visits or calls to family and friends. Saying goodbye to people as if they won’t be seen again. ***Immediate Action Required*** Making statements about not wanting to live (i.e. to other students or directly to staff) such as “missing them when they are gone,” or “it won’t matter much longer” or statements of harming self or others.
- **Sudden sense of calm** – A sudden sense of calm and happiness after being extremely depressed can mean that the person has decided to attempt suicide.

Here’s an easy-to-remember mnemonic representing the warning signs of suicide:

IS PATH WARM?

I: Ideation

S: Substance Abuse

P: Purposelessness

A: Anxiety

T: Trapped

H: Hopelessness

W: Withdrawal

A: Anger

R: Recklessness

M: Mood Changes

