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# A family failed: Suicide rarely spur of the moment

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Posted: Sunday, July 23, 2006 12:00 am | Updated: 11:41 am, Wed Dec 7, 2011.

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## In most cases taking one's live is contemplated over a period of time

When someone commits suicide, it is rarely a spur of the moment decision or brought on by one tragic event. Experts say there are risk factors and signs that loved ones can decipher if they just know what to look for.

"Sometimes the signs can be a little bit hidden or disguised," said Ole Thienhaus, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Nevada School of Medicine. "They may say they are tired of life or their life is just a waste. These comments are worth exploring and finding out if they are thoughts of suicide."

Thienhaus has been a psychiatrist for 25 years and he is the psychiatric director for the West Care Crisis Stabilization Center in Las Vegas. He works with clients who have psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia, manic depression, major depression or Alzheimer's in a region of the United States that has the highest suicide rate in the country.

"It's hard not to get involved with the management of suicide risk," Thienhaus said, who has worked with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

Only in very rare occasions is suicide a split minute decision, Thienhaus said.

"There are a few suicides where people try, usually when they are intoxicated or on drugs," Thienhaus said. "But it is rare that someone would do it who would not have thought about it before. It would be extremely unlikely."

Researchers shy away from quantifying the signs of suicide because of the high risk that family members will blame themselves or feel guilty for not preventing it. Though there have been few studies to substantiate it, Thienhaus said most family members will say that in retrospect they should have seen it coming.

"After settling down, most rack their brain and come up with some signs that in hindsight should have tipped them off," Thienhaus said. "The common thread is a sense of hopelessness and a loss of perspective. They are not making plans for the future. They are withdrawing."

Just before committing suicide, people might write a will or notes to family, but Thienhaus said most of the time there will be a substantial period of withdrawal.

"Suicide behavior is an intentionally lonely act," he said. "It is the ultimate rejection of human connection."

Thienhaus warns that just because a teenager has a bad day or a spouse is grumpy doesn't mean they are suicidal. The changes in behavior are gradual and happen over a long time. If family or friends look back six months to a year before someone commits suicide, they will often find that the person's behavior has changed drastically. They withdraw not just from loved ones but from activities as well.

"They stop enjoying the things they used to enjoy," Thienhaus said. "Whether it's a hobby, sexual intercourse, sports or going out to dinner."

Though a tragic event in a life such as the death of a loved one or the break up of a marriage can precipitate suicide, Thienhaus said there are

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usually other risk factors involved.

Several factors have been identified by doctors that put people at risk for suicide. Often people have an underlying psychiatric disorder, such as depression, schizophrenia, substance abuse or personality disorders. As many as 20 to 50 percent of people who kill themselves have previously attempted to commit suicide. Those with a history of family suicide, depression or other psychiatric illnesses and people who are highly impulsive are more at risk.

"We can't prevent people from having adverse events happen," Thienhaus said. "What we can do is be more sensitive to seeing people's style of adapting to life when it takes a turn."

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