

# WARNING SIGNS

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For additional copies of the Warning Signs guide call 1-800-268-0078 or go to: [helping.apa.org](http://helping.apa.org)

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# Introduction

“Being on either end of a violent situation, whether you seem to have come out with the upper hand or whether you don’t seem to, it doesn’t resolve anything. It escalates the problem. Hatred leads to more hatred. Violence leads to more violence.”

–Adam Yauch of the  
Beastie Boys

Violence. It’s the act of purposefully hurting someone. And it’s a major issue facing today’s young adults. One in 12 high schoolers is threatened or injured with a weapon each year. If you’re between the ages of 12 and 24, you face the highest risk of being the victim of violence.

At the same time, statistics show that by the early 1990’s the incidence of violence caused by young people reached unparalleled levels in American society.

There is no single explanation for the overall rise in youth violence. Many different factors cause violent behavior. The more these factors are present in your life, the more likely you are to commit an act of violence.

Factors that contribute to violent behavior include:

- peer pressure
- need for attention or respect
- feelings of low self-worth
- early childhood abuse or neglect
- witnessing violence at home, in the community or in the media
- easy access to weapons

## Reasons for violence

What causes someone to punch, kick, stab or fire a gun at someone else or even him/herself?

There is never a simple answer to that question. But people often commit violence because of one or more of the following:

**Expression.** Some people use violence to release feelings of anger or frustration. They think there are no answers to their problems and turn to violence to express their out of control emotions.

**Manipulation.** Violence is used as a way to control others or get something they want.

**Retaliation.** Violence is used to retaliate against those who have hurt them or someone they care about.

**Violence is a learned behavior.** Like all learned behaviors, it can be changed. This isn’t easy, though. Since there is no single cause of violence, there is no one simple solution. The best you can do is learn to recognize the warning signs of violence and to get help when you see them in your friends or yourself.

## Recognizing violence warning signs in others

Often people who act violently have trouble controlling their feelings. They may have been hurt by others. Some think that making people fear them through violence or threats of violence will solve their problems or earn them respect. This isn't true. People who behave violently lose respect. They find themselves isolated or disliked, and they still feel angry and frustrated.

**If you see these immediate warning signs, violence is a serious possibility:**

- loss of temper on a daily basis
- frequent physical fighting
- significant vandalism or property damage
- increase in use of drugs or alcohol
- increase in risk-taking behavior
- detailed plans to commit acts of violence
- announcing threats or plans for hurting others
- enjoying hurting animals
- carrying a weapon

**If you notice the following signs over a period of time, the potential for violence exists:**

- a history of violent or aggressive behavior
- serious drug or alcohol use
- gang membership or strong desire to be in a gang
- access to or fascination with weapons, especially guns
- threatening others regularly
- trouble controlling feelings like anger
- withdrawal from friends and usual activities
- feeling rejected or alone
- having been a victim of bullying
- poor school performance
- history of discipline problems or frequent run-ins with authority
- feeling constantly disrespected
- failing to acknowledge the feelings or rights of others



## What you can do if someone you know shows violence warning signs

When you recognize violence warning signs in someone else, there are things you can do. Hoping that someone else will deal with the situation is the easy way out.

Above all, be safe. Don't spend time alone with people who show warning signs.

If possible without putting yourself in danger, remove the person from the situation that's setting them off.

Tell someone you trust and respect about your concerns and ask for help. This could be a family member, guidance counselor, teacher, school psychologist, coach, clergy, school resource officer or friend.

If you are worried about being a victim of violence, get someone in authority to protect you. Do not resort to violence or use a weapon to protect yourself.

The key to really preventing violent behavior is asking an experienced professional for help. The most important thing to remember is don't go it alone.

## Dealing with anger

It's normal to feel angry or frustrated when you've been let down or betrayed.

But anger and frustration don't justify violent action. Anger is a strong emotion that can be difficult to keep in check, but the right response is always stay cool.

Here are some ways to deal with anger without resorting to violence:

- Learn to talk about your feelings—if you're afraid to talk or if you can't find the right words to describe what you're going through,
  - immediate warning signs find a trusted friend or adult to help you one-on-one.
- Express yourself calmly—express criticism, disappointment, anger or displeasure without losing your temper or fighting. Ask yourself if your response is safe and reasonable.
- Listen to others—listen carefully and respond without getting upset when someone gives you negative feedback. Ask yourself if you can really see the other person's point of view.
- Negotiate—work out your problems with someone else by looking at alternative solutions and compromises to deal with this now.

Anger is part of life, but you can free yourself from the cycle of violence by learning to talk about your feelings. Be strong. Be safe. Be cool.



## Are you at risk for violent behavior?

If you recognize any of the warning signs for violent behavior in yourself, get help. You don't have to live with the guilt, sadness and frustration that comes from hurting others.

Admitting you have a concern about hurting others is the first step. The second is to talk to a trusted adult such as a school counselor or psychologist, teacher, family member, friend or clergy. They can get you in touch with a licensed mental health professional who cares and can help.



## Controlling your own risk for violent behavior

Everyone feels anger in his or her own way. Start managing it by recognizing how anger feels to you.

When you are angry, you probably feel:

- muscle tension
- accelerated heartbeat
- a “knot” or “butterflies” in your stomach
- changes in your breathing
- trembling
- goose bumps
- flushed in the face

You can reduce the rush of adrenaline that’s responsible for your heart beating faster, your voice sounding louder, and your fists clenching if you:

- Take a few slow, deep breaths and concentrate on your breathing.
- Imagine yourself at the beach, by a lake, or anywhere that makes you feel calm and peaceful.
- Try other thoughts or actions that have helped you relax in the past.

Keep telling yourself:

- “Calm down.”
- “I don’t need to prove myself.”
- “I’m not going to let him/her get to me.”

**Stop. Consider the consequences.**

**Think before you act.**

Try to find positive or neutral explanations for what that person did that provoked you.

Don’t argue in front of other people.

Make your goal to defeat the problem, not the other person.

Learn to recognize what sets you off and how anger feels to you.

Learn to think through the benefits of controlling your anger and the consequences of losing control.

Most of all, stay cool and think. Only you have the power to control your own violent behavior, don’t let anger control you.

# Violence against self

Some people who have trouble dealing with their feelings don't react by lashing out at others. Instead, they direct violence toward themselves. The most final and devastating expression of this kind of violence is suicide.

Like people who are violent toward others, potential suicide victims often behave in recognizable ways before they try to end their lives. Suicide, like other forms of violence, is preventable. The two most important steps in prevention are recognizing warning signs and getting help.

Warning signs of potential self-violence include:

- previous suicide attempts
- significant alcohol or drug use
- threatening or communicating thoughts of suicide, death, dying or the afterlife
- sudden increase in moodiness, withdrawal, or isolation
- major change in eating or sleeping habits
- feelings of hopelessness, guilt or worthlessness
- poor control over behavior
- impulsive, aggressive behavior
- drop in quality of school performance or interest
- lack of interest in usual activity
- getting into trouble with authority figures
- perfectionism
- giving away important possessions
- hinting at not being around in the future or saying good-bye

These warning signs are especially noteworthy in the context of:

- a recent death or suicide of a friend or family member
- a recent break-up with a boyfriend or girlfriend, or conflict with parents
- news reports of other suicides by young people in the same school or community

Often, suicidal thinking comes from a wish to end deep psychological pain. Death seems like the only way out. But it isn't.

If a friend mentions suicide, take it seriously. Listen carefully, then seek help immediately. Never keep their talk of suicide a secret, even if they ask you to. Remember, you risk losing that person. Forever.

When you recognize the warning signs for suicidal behavior, do something about it. Tell a trusted adult what you have seen or heard. Get help from a licensed mental health professional as soon as possible. They can help work out the problems that seem so unsolvable but, in fact, are not.

**Take a stand against violence.**

