

# Suicide and Self-Harm

## Among Asian American Students



The MGH Center for Cross-Cultural  
Student Emotional Wellness

In 2017, **suicide** was the second leading cause of death among all Americans aged 15-24 in the US, but it was the **number one cause of death among Asian Americans** in that age group.

Asian college students are **60%**

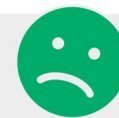
more likely than White students to seriously consider suicide.

Every **12.3 minutes** an American dies by suicide.



Firearms are the most common method of suicide in the U.S., accounting for about half of all suicide deaths.

### Common Causes



Of suicidal thoughts include: illnesses such as depression, bipolar disorder, substance use disorders, and borderline personality disorder.

#### Depression . . .

- Can be due to stress.
- Can be made worse by other medical causes such as thyroid issues, vitamin deficiencies, head injury, heart problems, cancer, etc.
- Often is characterized by feelings of guilt, worthlessness, hopelessness, and helplessness, all of which can contribute to a feeling that suicide is the only way out.

#### Drinking and drugs . . .

- Can worsen depression and anxiety, increase impulsivity, and ultimately increase the risk of acting on suicidal thoughts.

#### Social and cultural stressors . . .

- Can lead to suicidal thoughts due to family conflict, feeling like a burden, experiencing discrimination. See next page.



### MYTH:

**“People who attempt suicide are selfish.”**

This is a common misconception, especially in Asian cultures. Actually, people who are suicidal often view themselves as a burden on others, which is a common symptom of depression. They are not “taking the easy way out,” but instead mistakenly believe others would be better off without them.

### Definitions

#### What are suicidal thoughts?

Suicidal thoughts are thoughts about suicide, from brief thoughts to making detailed plans. It is a risk factor for suicide attempts.

#### What is a suicide attempt?

A suicide attempt is when a person tries to kill themselves but survives.

#### What is self-harm?

Self-harm, also called self-injurious behavior, is intentionally harming one's body without intending to kill oneself. This can include skin cutting, head banging or hitting, and burning.

Self-harm can be an unhealthy way to cope with negative emotions such as frustration, distress, boredom, and anger. It is often followed by guilt, shame, and even an increase in the emotions that caused the action in the first place.

## Contributing Factors in Asian Cultures

### Perfectionism

- Asian Americans can have high levels of perfectionism, associated with high personal standards, parental expectations, and criticism.
- Perfectionism increases the risk of suicidality and hopelessness.
- Hopelessness is an important determinant of suicidal behaviors and attempts.

### Cultural Values and Culture Clash

- Shame, honor, and need to “save face” may prevent acknowledging mental illness and seeking help.
- Young Asian American women may feel conflicted between wanting to satisfy strict expectations from their parents and from society, and rebelling against the “perfect Asian woman” stereotype. This can lead to challenges with identity along with unhealthy coping skills, including self-harm and suicidal thoughts.

### Family Conflict

- Asian cultures emphasize interdependence and family cohesion.
- Low levels of family communication increases the risk of suicide ideation more than 3 times.
- Certain parenting styles characterized by being disempowering and burdensome may also be associated with increased suicidal behaviors, especially among young Asian American women.



## Why are Asian American students more likely to consider suicide than White students?

### Perceived Discrimination

- Perceived racial discrimination is associated with suicidal thoughts in college-aged Asian Americans.

### Low Detection

- Asian Americans may show fewer warning signs before attempting suicide.
- Depression, which is highly correlated with suicidality, may be expressed more with physical rather than psychological symptoms in Asian Americans, and therefore may not be detected early. This is worsened by low rates of help-seeking.
- Suicide has not traditionally been stigmatized in many Asian cultures to the same extent as in European cultures. Social factors may play a larger role in suicides in East Asian countries such as Korea, Japan, and China compared to Western countries.



## What to do if you or a friend is feeling suicidal

- Treatments such as talk therapy and medications can decrease suicidal thoughts and teach coping mechanisms so suicide is not considered as the “only way out.”
- If you suspect someone is having suicidal thoughts, ask directly if she/he is considering suicide. Contrary to myth, asking directly about suicide does not increase the risk of suicide. If the person says “yes”, take it seriously & help her/him get professional help as soon as possible.
- If you believe someone is seriously considering making a suicide attempt, do not leave the person alone. Call 911 or the US National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255.

