



Gun Shops and Suicide

Q & A with the NH Firearm Safety Coalition

1. If I deny a sale to a suicidal person, won't they just use another method?

Some won't, others will. But almost every other method they would use is less likely to kill them. Also, other methods allow time for rescue or for the person to change their mind mid-attempt.

2. Won't a person who attempts suicide and survives eventually figure out a way to kill themselves later?

Suicidal feelings often pass over time. Studies that follow people over many years have found that over 90% of those who survive a suicide attempt do not go on to kill themselves later. This includes studies of people who made a very serious attempt, like jumping in front of a train.

3. Suicide is a sensitive subject—I'm concerned about offending my customers or making them feel uncomfortable.

It's true this is a difficult subject; but it's also true that thoughtful conversations about hard topics can produce good outcomes, in this case even save lives. A customer might see our poster or brochure in your store, for example, and talk his newly-divorced brother into putting his guns into storage until his depression lifts. Your store may have just helped save a life without your even knowing it. That said, it is important to us to ensure our materials share information in a respectful manner. Please let us know what you hear!

4. Suicide is a personal choice—it's your right to end your life. Who am I to intervene?

Some people attempt suicide after a lot of deliberation and are virtually certain their life is no longer worth living. But most are ambivalent, and many attempt during a crisis. Over half of attempters report less than an hour passed between deciding on suicide and making the attempt, according to a number of studies. Often people who have survived serious attempts say something like: "The moment I jumped I said to myself, 'What did I just do? I don't want to die.'" Also, last year over 10,000 people in their teens and twenties killed themselves in the U.S.—far too young an age to give up on life.

5. Does relocating the guns for a while *always* work?

There are no guarantees. But it's a simple step to make things safer. Reducing a suicidal person's access to guns and other lethal means is only one part of a broader suicide prevention plan. Getting professional help and the support of other family and friends is strongly advised. The Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available 24/7 at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Those who are actively suicidal are best protected by not being left alone until they are feeling better.

6. Could I be sued if I refuse to make a sale to someone who passes the background check?

The two largest gun shops in NH and ME have never been sued for this reason. As firearm retailers, we are NOT violating 2nd amendment rights by refusing a purchase or rental if we suspect something isn't right; it is well within our legal rights to deny a transaction (as long as this denial is not simply based on a person's race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, or sex). In fact, there have been instances where store owners have been sued by the family of someone who purchased a firearm and killed themselves soon after.

More on back

7. Customers could be acting funny for other reasons besides suicide—first-time customers are often a little nervous and don't know anything about guns.

It's hard to know for sure if someone is suicidal. The Tip Sheet is meant to help you and your staff identify customers with warning signs. Usually new customers are eager to hear advice from staff, and will gladly respond to questions that retailers ask as we try to help them select the best firearm for their purposes. It's those who are reluctant to talk about the purchase, or who seem to be troubled, who require extra caution. You should "go with your gut" and your experience.

8. I have had a customer purchase a gun for suicide, and he didn't exhibit ANY warning signs at all. You can't always spot people who are suicidal.

We agree, some suicidal customers won't show any outward signs, and firearm retailers aren't mind readers. But there have been occasions when a dealer asked a person who seemed shaky whether they should really be buying this gun, and they admitted they were considering suicide. One family wrote our co-Chair (former owner of Riley's Sports Shop) and said that his question saved their mother's life. The more ambivalent someone is about suicide, the greater the opportunity for intervention. We can't save everyone, but we can save some.

9. The Tip Sheet says over 1-in-20 firearm suicides were with guns purchased within a week, usually the same day. What's that based on?

The information comes from the NH Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, which investigates every suicide death. The reports that investigators file will sometimes note, for example, that they found a receipt for the gun at the death scene, or a family member reported that the victim just bought the gun.

10. What do I say to a customer who keeps a gun at home for self-defense but is worried a family member is suicidal?

Protecting the people we love means knowing the biggest threats to their safety. This can change over time. When a person is struggling with a mental health or drug/alcohol problem, suicide is usually the bigger risk than a serious attack. In New Hampshire, suicides outnumber homicides 15-to-1. Gun owners can make the wisest gun storage decisions when they weigh their own family's risk of attack with their risk of suicide. When someone is going through a rough time, storing guns away from home—or making sure they have no access to household guns--might be the wisest choice until the person recovers. For other ways to help the person, call the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988 or NH Rapid Response: Call/Text 833-710-6477.

OTHER QUESTIONS?

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