

Gun Shops and Suicide: A Q&A with the NH Firearm Safety Coalition

1. Won't a suicidal person just use something else if they can't get a gun?

Sometimes, yes. But almost every other method is less lethal than a firearm so there's a greater chance the person won't die in their attempt. Also, other methods allow time for rescue or give the ambivalent attempter some time to change their mind mid-attempt.

2. If a suicidal person substitutes another method and doesn't die, won't they 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 roughly 90% of those who survive a suicide attempt do not go on to die by suicide, including those 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 to his newly-divorced brother about letting him hold onto his guns until his deep depression lifts. Your store may have just helped save a life without your even knowing it. That said, it is very 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 if someone doesn't want to live anymore?

Suicide is certainly a personal choice. Some people attempt suicide after a lot of deliberation and are virtually certain life is no longer worth living. But many attempt during a crisis and most are ambivalent. 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, thousands of people in their teens and twenties kill themselves each year in the U.S.—too young an age to give up on life.

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

Reducing access to firearms and other lethal means is only part of a broader suicide prevention plan. Those considered actively suicidal are best protected by not being left alone until they are feeling better. Getting professional help and the support of other family and friends is strongly advised. The Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-TALK (8255) and is available 24/7.

6. I'm concerned I'll be sued if I refuse to make a sale or rent a firearm to someone who passes the background check.

The two largest gun shops in NH and ME have never been sued for this reason. Stores and ranges 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.

7. Customers could be acting funny for other reasons besides suicide—first time customers in particular 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 your staff identify customers who exhibit some "red flags." Usually new customers are eager to hear purchasing advice from staff, and will gladly respond to questions we may ask as we try to help them select the best firearm for their purposes. It's those who are reluctant to converse with staff about the purchase, or who seem to be troubled, who require extra caution. You should "go with your gut" and your experience.

8. The Tip Sheet says one in ten firearm suicides were with recently purchased guns. That sounds like a lot—I've been in business for many years and never thought a customer was suicidal.

It sounded like a lot to us, too. But that number comes straight from the office of the NH Medical Examiner. When the ME's office investigates a death, sometimes they'll find a receipt for the gun in the victim's pocket or next to the gun, so they know it's a recent purchase. Hopefully you and your staff will never come across a suicidal customer, but being prepared should that unfortunate day come could save a life.

9. 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 really serious about killing themselves.

There's no way all suicides can be prevented. 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 (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.

10. What do I say to a customer who keeps a gun at home for self-defense but is worried about someone at home who's going through a rough time?

It depends on how that gun is stored. If a customer's loved one at home (or with keys to their home) is going through a rough time, they may want to re-evaluate the accessibility of that firearm to that person. Suicide may be the bigger threat that your customer has to guard against in the short term until the situation improves.

The information in this document was originally developed by the New Hampshire Firearm Safety Coalition as part of an effort to bring together a broad range of individuals and organizations around the common goal of suicide prevention. For more information about the Coalition and its work, visit www.nhfsc.org