

Suicide and Our Youth

Suicide is the second leading cause of death of youth age 10-24 in Oregon. According to the Oregon Healthy Teens Survey in 2018, around 1 in 5 (19.7%) of Oregon's 11th graders had experienced thoughts of suicide in the past year. Additionally, 35.6% of students reported feeling sad or hopeless for two weeks or more. It can feel overwhelming for adults who care about the youth we work with to think about responding to these statistics. However, there is hope. By taking actions to reduce stigma and reach out to youth who are hurting, we can combat these statistics and keep our youth safe.

Research in youth wellness shows that having **one trusted adult** in their life can dramatically increase the ability of a young person to cope with stress. For every youth, we hope that they have lots of options for trusted adults to reach out to in their life. However, depending on their life circumstances, it could be hard for a young person to identify adults that they trust. **That's where you come in.** For student athletes, a coach can provide a trusting and mentoring relationship that can help students feel comfortable reaching out for help.

Talking about Suicide

Talking openly about suicide can be a key part of combatting stigma surrounding mental health challenges. **Stigma** is a negative thought or idea about a characteristic that someone has, such as living with a mental illness. Stigmatizing beliefs about mental illness include that all people with mental illness are dangerous, that reaching out for help is weak, among others. Students might be more hesitant to ask for help because of these beliefs being present in their communities. Incorporating mental health into discussions that we naturally have around physical health can make seeking help more normalized. For example, we can talk about the importance of taking care of your mental health in the same way that we talk about the importance of a healthy diet and regular exercise.

The main way that coaches can help youth that might be struggling is **noticing changes**. Is a student that is usually engaged with school suddenly skipping classes? Is a student that is usually quiet and shy suddenly acting very outgoing? These sudden changes in behavior in young people are sometimes thought of as normal phases that all young people go through – and that might be true for many youth. However, they can also be signs that a young person is struggling with their mental health.

So, if you notice that a young person might be struggling with their mental health or having thoughts of suicide, what do you do next? The first thing that you can do as a trusted adult in their life is **reach out**. Remember that **talking or asking about suicide does not put the idea into a young person's mind**. More often than not, the young person you are talking to will be relieved that you care. Find a quiet and private location where you can talk and check in on what you're noticing and how you can help.

Checking in might look or sound like this:

- Hey, I noticed that you've seemed sad/anxious/irritated a lot lately. How are you doing?

- I remember you telling me that things are hard at home right now, do you want to talk more about what's going on?
- I've noticed that you've missed some practices lately and that it seems like you're struggling. Is there something I can do to help?

Asking the question about if a young person is thinking about suicide is crucial. The way we ask can make a huge difference in how a student feels about talking to us. Asking **directly and compassionately** can sound like this:

- Sometimes, when people are feeling like this, they have thoughts of killing themselves. Are you having thoughts of suicide?
- Have you ever thought about suicide?
- Do you have a plan for how you would kill yourself?
 - If a student has a plan for suicide and/or you are concerned about their immediate safety, make sure to follow your school protocols to get this student help. (**please check with your administration before crisis to clarify what your school protocols and procedures are**). Do not leave them alone. Walk with them to a counselor's office and work with other staff to **contact their parent/guardian**. Worst case scenario: If the counseling center is closed and no additional staff are available, stay with the student and continue to offer support. You can connect with a crisis line (see resources below) for additional support. If the student cannot stay safe or is at imminent risk for suicide, don't hesitate to call 911. Having a conversation with the student before contacting emergency services is encouraged.

How to offer support:

Listening compassionately about what a young person is going through is important. Often, as adults, we might have advice or wisdom to pass on to the youth that we work with. Using active listening skills can help us not jump to trying to "fix" a problem right away. These skills include paraphrasing ("It sounds like you're going through a really bad break up right now"), reflecting ("It's so heartbreaking to watch your parents go through a divorce"), and asking open-ended questions ("How are you feeling about what's going on with your sister right now?"). Check in with the young person about their **reasons for living**. These can be things like future plans ("I want to go to college") or the care they have towards their loved ones ("My parents would be sad"). Remember that it is important that we **never keep thoughts of suicide a secret**. Involving other supportive adults can link the students to needed mental health supports.

Mental Health Resources

After having this conversation with a student, you might wonder what to do next. There are many resources that can help with mental health issues or crisis in our state and nationally.

- If your school has a **School Based Health Center**, linking a student to mental health supports can be easy and cost-free.
- The **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** is answered in Oregon by Lines for Life 1-800-273-8255 or text 273TALK to 839-863
- **The YouthLine** is a teen-to-teen peer helpline that offers support from crisis-trained young people from 4-10PM every day. Calls are answered during off-hours by Lines for Life. Call 1-877-968-8491 or text Teen2Teen to 839-863 or chat at www.oregonyouthline.org
- **The Trevor Project** is an organization that does culturally specific crisis services with LGBTQ+ youth, call 1-866-488-7386 24/7 or visit www.thetrevorproject.org