



Oregon Youth Suicide Prevention Campaign – Article #4

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Tips for Talking to Students about Suicide

In previous columns, we've discussed risk factors for suicide and how to identify the warning signs that a student may be at risk. This column focuses on tips for talking to a student about suicide if you have observed those warning signs or know a student is facing difficulties that place them at risk of killing themselves.

If you hear talk about death or observe warning signs, you will need to talk to the student. It's normal for adults to fear this conversation and not know how to approach the youth.

Remember, talking about suicide will not "put the thought in someone's mind". By the time you've seen warning signs, the youth likely has been thinking about suicide for some time. They will be relieved that you noticed their struggle and care enough to reach out. **Assume you are the only one who will reach out.**

First, find a private, quiet location for your conversation. Set aside time when you won't be interrupted or have to rush the conversation.

Tip 1: Use non-judgmental questions that validate the student's feelings. Avoid shaming or blaming the student.

- *I've seen that you're going through some tough times recently, how are you doing?*
- *You've seemed sad/anxious/agitated lately. Is anything going on?*
- *I've noticed that you're struggling at practice/in class lately, is there something I can help you with?*

Tip 2: Ask the question. Gather information without disapproval. If you've heard or observed warning signs and think the student is at risk for suicide, ask directly:

- *Have you considered killing yourself?*
- *If so, when was the last time you were suicidal?*
- *Are you suicidal now?*
- *Do you have a plan to do it? If so what is that plan?* NOTE: If the student is suicidal now and/or has a plan, follow your school protocol to get help for the youth. Do not leave them alone. Walk them to the counselor's office and wait until they're with another responsible adult. Follow school procedures for contacting the parents/guardians.

Tip 3: Listen to understand their feelings. Let them explore reasons that they want to die without criticism. It is difficult just listening about this uncomfortable topic and not trying to fix the youth's problems right there and now. But validating the student's feelings is important for them to feel heard and understood. Use your best active listening skills, including paraphrasing, asking open-ended questions or for clarification so you can understand fully.

Tip 4: After they've discussed their reasons for wanting to die, then **ask them what reasons they have for living.** This may include things like future aspirations (I want to be a doctor), a favorite pet that they love, not wanting to disappoint a friend, parent or sibling, etc. At this point, don't try to fix the student's problem.

Tip 5: After they've talked about reasons for wanting to die and reasons for living, **reflect those back to the student and get agreement that the way you've paraphrased is accurate.**

- *I hear that you want to die because xxxxxx and I hear that you want to live because of xxxxxx. Did I understand correctly?*
- *I'd like to help you through this, is that okay? While all of us have bad days, thinking of suicide is not normal and is serious. I think you need help and I'm here to help you.*
- *Let's go to the counselor's office together and I'll help you get to someone who can support you through this.*

NOTE: NEVER MAKE A PROMISE TO KEEP SUICIDE A SECRET. Explain that this is too serious for secrets and you and the student will need help from others.

Tip 6: Provide them with the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline's contact information and have them put it in their phone. 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741-741.

Tip 7: After you've made the handoff to the counselor or other responsible adult: The next few times you see the student, **ask if they got the help they needed.** If not, ask what would be helpful and help them access that.

NOTE: DO NOT PROMISE THAT YOU WILL "BE THERE" OR "HELP OUT" UNLESS YOU WILL FOLLOW THROUGH. Letting them down could lead to further feelings of isolation and worthlessness.

SOME STATEMENTS TO AVOID WHEN SPEAKING TO A STUDENT AT RISK OF SUICIDE:

- *Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.*

This can seem to the student as dismissive and a meaningless platitude. It communicates that a person's problems are temporary at a time when it feels as if they'll last forever and life seems hopeless. Instead of saying this, offer an activity you can make available that suits the student's interests. The activity can make the student feel connected and needed and part of the school community.

- *Other people have problems worse than you and don't want to die.*

People who are suicidal may be ashamed that they are "too weak", "broken" or "worthless". Comparing their feelings to others is not helpful because it may reinforce these feelings. Comparing them to others who cope better may make them condemn themselves even more.

- *You think you have problems? Adults have bigger problems!*

It isn't helpful to "compare" the student's problems to yours or to other adults. To the student, their problems seem insurmountable and comparisons can be hurtful.

- *Your life isn't that bad - or -things could be worse.*

What could be worse than wanting to die? The suicidal person sees their life as deeply flawed and unendingly painful. They can't see the bright future that you see. They aren't thinking objectively.

- *You don't mean it. You don't want to die. You're just kidding, right?*

It is true that people who are suicidal often don't want to die; they just want the pain to stop. However, this statement will seem dismissive to the suicidal student. Take all thoughts about suicide seriously.

- *You're just trying to get attention.*

Yes, this student is crying out for attention. It is not a game played by a student who is manipulating you. Again, take all thoughts of suicide seriously.

- *You have so much to live for.*

For many people who are suicidal, the future isn't even visible. They are in deep psychological pain and that is all they can feel at the time. To them, this statement can present a remarkable lack of understanding for their pain.

- *Your death would devastate those that love and care for you*

While this is a true statement, often someone who is suicidal is in so much internal pain, they cannot think beyond their pain to consider how their actions might hurt others. Sometimes they truly believe they are a burden and their death would be a relief for others. But telling them that their death would hurt others may only make them feel like their feelings and pain are less important than the feelings of their loved ones.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW TO TALK TO STUDENTS WHO ARE SUICIDAL, SEE:

Applied Suicide Intervention Training (ASIST). A two-day best practice interactive training on intervening with the suicidal person. Open to anyone age 16 and older. There are many trainers and trainings across Oregon, some at no cost. To find a trainer near you, go to <https://www.livingworks.net/programs/asist/>.

Question, Persuade, Refer. A short online best practice training that covers how to question someone you think is at risk, how to talk with them and persuade them to seek help, and how to refer them to care. To take the 90-minute, \$29.95 online course from the QPR Institute, go to <https://www.qprinstitute.com/individual-training>.

Talk Saves Lives. Information from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. Trainings may be offered in your area: <https://afsp.org/our-work/education/talk-saves-lives-introduction-suicide-prevention/>