

Tough Conversations: Do's and Don'ts When Talking with a Suicidal Student

Suicide is the second leading cause of death of those aged 10-34. As an educator, it is important to allow a suicidal person to feel safe and give them an opportunity to express his or her feelings that can provide relief from loneliness and pent-up negative feelings, and may prevent a suicide attempt. Start a meaningful conversation with youth to help reduce the stigma associated with mental health and to show them that they are not alone.

Consider the guidelines to help during a private conversation with an at-risk student that you are concerned about. Remember; anyone who talks about suicide or shows other warning signs needs immediate help it is not your job to counsel a student, that is the role of a mental health professional. Your role is to identify, ensure safety and refer for help. If you do not feel comfortable talking alone with a student, please refer the student to his or her guidance counselor.

DO

- Speak privately and non-judgmentally.
- Offer hope. Let the student know you care, that they are not alone.
- Listen and let the student do most of the talking. Take the person seriously.
- Ask clarifying questions. (i.e. “Just so I understand, you are saying...”)
- Inform the student that you or other school personnel are available to talk in the future.
- Inform the student that you will be sharing this information with the student’s school counselor as an extra support in the building for him or her.
- Ensure the student that you will not be sharing his or her information with other teachers and students.

DO NOT

- Promise to keep your conversation confidential. A life is at stake and you may need to speak to a mental health professional in order to keep the suicidal person safe. Your first priority is the student’s health, safety and welfare.
- Talk to other teachers about your private conversation. The school counselor will share information with that student’s teachers as appropriate.
- Try to give advice or act like a therapist. Do not diagnose.
- Use cliché statements such as “you’ll be fine,” or “this is just a phase” or “everyone goes through it” or “have you thought about medications.”
- Argue with the suicidal person. Avoid saying things like: “You have so much to live for,” “Your suicide will hurt your family,” or “Just snap out of it.”
- Take over the conversation by giving advice.
- Dismiss a student’s concerns.



Talking to an individual about their suicidal thoughts and feelings can be extremely difficult for anyone. But if you're unsure whether someone is suicidal, the best way to find out is to ask. You can't make a person suicidal by showing that you care. In fact, giving a suicidal person the opportunity to express his or her feelings can provide relief from loneliness and pent-up negative feelings, and may prevent a suicide attempt.

Ways to start a conversation about suicide:

- *"I have been feeling concerned about you lately."*
- *"Recently, I have noticed some differences in you and wondered how you are doing."*
- *"I wanted to check in with you because you haven't seemed yourself lately."*

Questions you can ask:

- *"When did you begin feeling like this?"*
- *"Did something happen to make you start feeling this way?"*
- *"How can I best support you right now?"*
- *"Have you thought about getting help?"*
- *"Who have you shared this with?"*

What you can say that helps:

- *"You are not alone in this. I'm here for you."*
- *"You may not believe it now, but the way you're feeling will change."*
- *"I may not be able to understand exactly how you feel, but I care about you and want to help."*
- *"Is there something you use as an outlet to feel better?"*

