

Let's Talk: Suicide – having the conversation

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Hi, everybody, my name is Erica. Let's talk about what to do when you're concerned that someone may be thinking about suicide.

Look for warning signs

So what we know is that most people give warning signs before they attempt suicide. Not everybody, but most people. So the kinda things you wanna look out for are a depressed mood or a person who's having a lot of mood swings. Somebody who seems hopeless. They might talk about things like their not being any way out or there's no hope for the future. If somebody's talking or writing about death a lot, that's also something you wanna watch out for. If somebody's trying to access means by which they might try and take their lives like firearms or pills, for example. If somebody is trying to put things in order like maybe writing a will or giving away cherished items or doing things that seem like they're saying goodbye to you, those are big red flags too. Now another red flag that you really wanna look out for that actually seems unusual and counterintuitive is if somebody has been really depressed and down for a long time, and then all of a sudden seems happy and satisfied. That's actually a big warning sign that somebody may have made the decision to try and take their lives. And the reason that they might seem happy all of a sudden is that it feels like a weight has been lifted for them.

Ask them if they are thinking about suicide

So what can you do if you're concerned that somebody is thinking about suicide? The number one thing you can do is talk to them about it, ask them. Now this can be really scary for you. Even as a clinician who's worked with people for a long time, it always made my heart beat a little bit faster right before I asked somebody about whether or not they were thinking about suicide. But the reason that this is so important is that it will let you know where they stand so that you can then get them help. And don't worry about accidentally putting the idea in somebody's head. That's actually a myth. When you ask them about it, a lot of times it can provide relief for them in that they're not going to accidentally burden you by telling you about their thoughts of suicide.

Having the conversation

So get ready to have the conversation. Take a deep breath and try to stay as calm as you can. And then ask the person explicitly if they're thinking about hurting or killing themselves. You might want to say something like, "Have you thought about taking your own life?" "Are you thinking about suicide?" Or "Are you thinking about doing something that would hurt yourself?" Let them know that you care and that you're worried about them.

Things to avoid

Now there are things that you want to avoid during this conversation. For example, try to keep your face as calm as possible because if you show dread on your face when you say, "Are you thinking about suicide?" They're less likely to be honest with you if they are thinking about suicide. You also want to avoid showing judgment, trying to fix their depression, or trying to talk them out of suicide. Although those feelings and that reaction is very normal to have. Another thing you want to avoid is agreeing to keep any suicidal thoughts a secret. Because if they end up doing something, you'll end up feeling very guilty in the end and wishing that you had told somebody and reached out for help. And finally, if the person says yes, that they are thinking about suicide and especially if they happen to have means available like drugs or firearms, don't leave the person alone.

If they are suicidal

So what should you do if somebody says, yes, that they are thinking about suicide? Take a deep breath, stay calm, remember not to judge and stay with the person. Also be sure that you take them seriously, even if you think the person is telling you that they're thinking about suicide to get attention, they probably need some attention and you need to take it seriously. Work with them to get help. You can call a local suicide hotline. You can call their physician. If the person is long-distance from you and you're on the phone and you're worried about them, you can also call 911. Emergency responders are trained to help people who are experiencing suicidal thoughts. And finally, offer hope. Remember to let the person know that you are there for them and that you're gonna stay there with them.

Start the conversation

It can be really hard and scary when somebody you know seems like they might be thinking about suicide, but remember that it's important to start the conversation.

Find resources at [Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#) and the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#), 1-800-273-8255.

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This information is not a substitute for diagnosis or treatment by a professional and is not meant to replace the advice of a professional. Please note that there may be many other explanations for any or all of the above delineated behaviors. This information is not intended to be an exhaustive list of all signs concerning warning sign of suicide and should not be used as a stand-alone instrument. Contact a professional with any questions or concerns about specific health care needs.

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