



Reaching Out: Ask, Listen and Get Help

What do you do if you see and hear things that lead you suspect a young person is suicidal? Helpers in trust-based, or fiduciary relationships with youth, may have a legal responsibility to intervene with a youth we perceive to be at risk of harming themselves or others. There are three basic aspects to consider when reaching out and supporting a suicidal youth:

Ask

The first thing to do if you think someone may be suicidal is to ask them directly. They will probably be relieved that someone actually asked. It's a good idea to begin by letting them know you are concerned about them, that you have observed certain behaviours/feelings that give you cause to think they may be suicidal. And then follow up by asking them directly if they have been thinking about killing themselves.

Coach: Jennifer, I'm worried about you. I've noticed you spending more and more time alone. When I look at you in practice, your mind seems to be somewhere else. And you often look like you're about to start crying. I'm wondering what all of these changes are about.

Student: Oh. Just some stuff. You know. No big deal.

Coach: I'd like to help if I can. From where I'm standing, it looks like you could be struggling with some pretty big stuff.

Student: Uh. Yeah. Maybe. I don't know. I don't think anyone can do anything about it. But thanks.

Coach: Sometimes, Jennifer, when people have big problems that they feel can't be solved, they think that ending their own life is the only solution. Have you been thinking about killing yourself, Jennifer?

Student: Uh. Yeah. Sort of. Sometimes.

Coach: Jennifer. I'm so glad you told me. That took a lot of courage.

Bringing up the subject of suicide can help reduce some of the shame the youth may be feeling. By talking with a youth you are also showing that you care and that you have the courage to hear anything they want to tell you.



If you decide to ask, pick somewhere private. And be prepared to listen to more than just their answer. Let them know that you want to hear how they are feeling, and you want to hear what's causing the distress they are experiencing. Let them know clearly that you want to help.

It takes a lot of courage to ask. For some of us, it also may not feel like the right thing to do. If you feel that you would prefer not to ask, find someone trustworthy who will.

Listen

Aside from professional treatment, a suicidal teen needs to know there are trustworthy people who care, and who are available to talk. Good support means listening to what's troubling them, without passing judgment on their feelings, perceptions, or behaviours. The youth should be reassured that there are always solutions to problems and ways other than suicide for coping with them.

Giving an adolescent the chance to open up and talk about their feelings will help relieve some of the distress of those intense emotions, and make them feel less alone. If they are currently overwhelmed by their emotions, their capacities for problem solving, healthy coping, and agreeing to some safety measures will be diminished. Supporting them to safely express and name their thoughts and feelings can help to reverse this crisis state.

It is also important for you to find out the degree of suicidal risk they are currently at. If the youth doesn't mention a plan for taking their life, enquire. If they have a plan, it's important to assess the certainty, or seriousness of their intent to carry it out. Also discover the timeline and whether or not they have access to the means they are planning to use, e.g., pills. Enquire about current use of drugs and/or alcohol, and also about high risk activities they may be currently engaging in.



Get Help

If you are working with a teen who you feel is potentially at risk for suicide:

Express Concern: If a teen tells you that they are having thoughts of suicide, let them know that you're concerned for their safety. If it's appropriate, also let them know that you'll continue to support them, but that you don't have the experience, or the energy, to provide all of the support and information you believe they will need to move beyond their suicidal crisis.

Connect them to support: Explore with them both informal and formal sources of support. *Let them know that you are not going to leave them alone until you know they have connected with another supportive adult.* If they can't agree to this, let them know their safety is your number one concern, and you will talk to another supportive adult on their behalf, such as a parent, counselor or family member, so they are connected to someone else who cares.

Give them the number of emergency supports, like distress lines, **1-800-SUICIDE**, www.YouthInBC.com private chat link, and **911**. These services offer counselling for a crisis situation, and can provide the immediate support an adolescent may need to survive a low point. These services can inform youth and their families of professional mental health services in their community.

Refer to professional help: It's important to seek professional help for a suicidal adolescent. Guidance counsellors or counsellors at crisis centres can assess level of risk and ensure that a distressed teen receives the needed assistance.

Use School Support Systems: School districts typically have protocols in place for dealing with students in crisis that provides teacher's guidance in identifying and responding to potential suicidal. It is important to follow the schools protocols, if they exist, regarding a potentially suicide teen.



Ongoing Support

A young person spends a significant amount of time at school; therefore the role of school personnel is significant throughout the teen's healing process. School staff, such as teachers are often aware of some of the teen's strengths - what they are good at, what they like doing, who they care about. A suicidal teen is probably less connected to their strengths during a time of crisis, but these strengths are still a part of them and it is valuable to be reminded of them. This may also be a good time to support the teen in identifying and connecting to new people and activities. Go with what they seem to respond to most and recognize that all sources of inspiration or interest they identify - however small or seemingly insignificant - may serve as potential lifelines to aid with their healing and ongoing choice to stay alive.

Self-Care for the Helper

Supporting a youth in crisis is not an easy thing to do. Be sure that you take care of yourself. Don't be their only support: make sure you're part of a community of informal and formal supports. After listening, caring and helping, it is sometimes difficult to 'shake off' the emotions that have been stirred up. It can be helpful to:

- **Debrief:** Talking to someone you trust about the situation will give you the chance to get the support you need and reflect on how you feel and how it has affected you. Talking can release pressure or bottled emotions you may feel inside. It may also give you a new perspective on the situation and an opportunity to (re)examine your role.
- **Healthy level of Responsibility:** Know where you "stop" and where the person you are helping "begins." Acknowledge that you can offer your best support in your professional role and the appropriate referral, but that you are ultimately not responsible for making decisions for the teen.
- **Keeping a Balance:** Look after yourself and your own health. It can feel really hard to attend yourself when someone you care for is in crisis. However, it is the best thing you can do for everyone's sake. Sleeping, eating well, relaxing, remaining connected to primary relationships, and doing creative activities you enjoy will help you refresh yourself and recharge. Investing in yourself will allow you to be a better support to the student. Your ability to thrive, in spite of challenging circumstances, will also model a healthy example to the teen, demonstrating that it is possible to navigate difficult situations from a place of balance and self-care.