



AMERICAN COUNSELING
ASSOCIATION

SUICIDE PREVENTION TIP SHEET

Prepared by **By Kristin L. Bruns, PhD, and Amber Letcher, PhD,**
Assistant Professors, Counseling and Human Development, South Dakota State University

Introduction: A lot of people will think about suicide at some point in their lives, youth included. There are many reasons why these thoughts may come up. Sometimes when people struggle with problems that seem overwhelming, they may begin to feel trapped, helpless, or hopeless. Many times, those experiencing suicidal ideation just want to stop feeling miserable. People experiencing suicidal thoughts will all have a different story, but it is important to remember that regardless of what they are feeling, they are likely having a hard time seeing or believing that things could ever be better.

If you are worried that someone is experiencing such feelings, it's very important to make an effort to connect with them, then take action as appropriate. Sometimes youth tell us things in confidence and ask us to promise not to tell anyone else. But keeping the secret of suicide doesn't help anyone. Safety has to take priority! Youth suicide is preventable.

Ways to address the topic of suicide with youth:

It's normal to feel anxiety and discomfort when approaching someone for whom you are concerned. Just remember, the goal is not to take on the person's problem or to have all of the right answers. The goal is to show honest compassion.

NOTICE: "Is everything okay? I've noticed that you have been..."

State the specific behavior or language that is concerning to you. It will show that you are paying attention.

CARE: "I'm concerned. This isn't typical for you. You are important to me."

Let the person know that you care and validate the experiences or feelings he shares with you.

ASK: "Sometimes when people are feeling lonely and depressed, they think about suicide. Are you thinking about suicide?"

Ask directly about suicide. Asking about suicidal feelings doesn't encourage people to think about suicide, or "put ideas into their head." If someone tells you that they are suicidal, it's time to act, even if they have asked you to keep it a secret.

Note: Depending on the age of the youth, you may want to alter your wording. For example, you could say, "Do you ever think about dying?" or, "Do you ever think about hurting yourself?"

HELP: "Let's talk to your parent(s) and come up with a plan together."

Always wrap up with an action plan that can be followed together. You will likely take the lead on this, especially if this is the first time the youth is disclosing her thoughts of suicide. After listening to her, talking to her parent(s) should be the first step. Having access to a list of mental healthcare providers and/or agencies in your area is also important. Please take steps to prepare one now. You can help facilitate a discussion with the parent(s) and provide your list of resources. You may also offer to help facilitate the phone call for services.

If the youth has a cell phone, share this resource: The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 800-273-TALK (8255). Help him to save the number in his phone so he will always have an adult to call. Share this number

with parents as well, as they can use it if they need an immediate consult. Remember, 911 is best for URGENT safety concerns.

FOLLOW UP:

Checking in with the youth will help to reduce stigma from the events/feelings and will open the door for future conversations. By starting this conversation, you will create an open environment and encourage her to come to you in times of stress.

Dealing with a suicidal youth can be quite overwhelming and stressful. After contacting parents and connecting families with resources, you may find it beneficial to talk about your own experience in the situation, too. Hearing that someone is thinking of suicide is tough, and reaching out for your own support is just as important!

Suicidal signs to watch for:

Your first step in helping may be as simple as learning the FACTS, or warning signs. The following signs may mean that a youth is at risk for suicide, particularly if he has attempted suicide in the past.

Feelings: Expressing hopelessness about the future.

Actions: Displaying severe/overwhelming pain or distress.

Changes: Showing worrisome behaviors or marked changes in behavior, including withdrawal from friends, changes in social activities, anger, hostility, or changes in sleep patterns.

Threats: Talking or writing about death, or making plans for suicide.

Situations: Experiencing stressful situations including those that involve loss, change, personal humiliation, or getting into trouble at home, in school, or with the law. These types of situations can serve as triggers for suicide.

Additional warning signs suggesting that a teen may be considering suicide:

- Childhood abuse
- Recent traumatic event
- Lack of a support network
- Availability of a gun
- Hostile social or school environment
- Exposure to other teen suicides
- Change in eating and sleeping habits
- Withdrawal from friends, family, and regular activities
- Violent or rebellious behavior, running away
- Drug and/or alcohol use
- Unusual neglect of personal appearance
- Persistent boredom, difficulty concentrating, or a decline in the quality of schoolwork
- Frequent complaints about physical symptoms, often related to emotions, such as stomachaches, headaches, fatigue, etc.
- Not tolerating praise or rewards

If you notice any of these warning signs, you can help!

Cultivating a safe environment to discuss mental health concerns:

How you respond to the youth who is showing signs of emotional distress or a potential problem is important. Always remember that you aren't a therapist and it isn't your job to fix the situation or give advice. Your role is to be supportive and help them talk with their parents, even if you don't fully understand the problem or its severity. Beyond that, openly talking about resources in the community with the youth and parents is important. If you have never been to counseling, do a little research. Call your local agencies and ask them to explain what it would be like for a parent/youth to set up services. Be prepared to talk with the

parents about what the counseling process is like in your area.

It is essential to be patient and supportive. Sometimes just listening and letting them know they aren't alone is the best thing you can do. Don't act on the impulse to give advice for their specific situation.

Here are some key points you can make in conversation:

"We all go through tough or scary times." Sometimes youth think that they are the only ones who struggle with life's challenges. Helping them to grasp the reality that we all struggle at different points in life, and that their concerns are warranted will reduce the stigma of reaching out for help.

"It's OK to ask for help." By saying this, you are normalizing the help-seeking process for youth. You are modeling for them that we all need help sometimes.

"I'm here for you." From the beginning, it is important to let the youth know that you are available to LISTEN without judgment. Avoid the temptation to give advice. Sometimes we all just need to feel heard.

Resources for vulnerable youth:

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Call: 1-800-273-TALK(8255)

www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

You Matter: <http://www.youmatter.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

Your Life Your Voice

Call: 1-800-448-3000

Text: Free every day, 6PM to midnight (CST); Text VOICE to 20121 to start.

www.yourlifeyourvoice.org

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: <http://afsp.org/>

The Trevor Project

www.thetrevorproject.org

TrevorLifeline: A crisis intervention and suicide prevention phone service available 24/7 at 1-866-488-7386.

TrevorText: Available on Fridays (4:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m. ET / 1:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m. PT). Text the word "Trevor" to 1-202-304-1200. Standard text messaging rates apply.

TrevorSpace: A social networking site (www.trevorspace.org) for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth ages 13 through 24, and their friends and allies.

The Trevor Support Center: (<http://www.thetrevorproject.org/pages/support-center>) A place where LGBTQ youth and their allies can find answers to frequently asked questions, and explore resources related to sexual orientation, gender identity, and more.

National Runaway Safeline

www.1800runaway.org

1-800-RUNAWAY(1-800-786-2929)

SAMHSA's National Helpline

<http://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

American Counseling Association's Find a Counselor Page: <https://www.counseling.org/aca-community/learn-about-counseling/what-is-counseling/find-a-counselor>