



Ways to respond to your child if they are experiencing suicidal thoughts

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Youth who are contemplating suicide frequently give warning signs – some more subtle, others more pronounced. Parents, friends, and other trusted adults are in a key position to identify the signs and get help. Suicide is preventable.

Talking openly and honestly about emotional distress and suicide is okay. It will not make someone more suicidal or put the idea of suicide in their mind. While teens who feel suicidal are not likely to seek help directly, knowing how to acknowledge and respond when thoughts of emotional distress or suicide are shared with you is important.

Some warning signs listed may not seem like a big deal to you. But, they might be a big deal to your child. Don't dismiss or overlook something because they say it doesn't bother them.

Risk Factors Associated with an Increased Likelihood of Suicidal Thoughts

SITUATIONAL

Recent loss of a loved one, survivor of a previous suicide attempt, loss of prestige within friend group/at school/etc, serious illness, family history of suicide, close friend dies by suicide

BEHAVIORAL

Talking or writing about death/suicide, giving away personal items, not participating in regular activities, change in behaviors/mood, failing grades, ending close relationships

EMOTIONAL

Sense of personal failure, overwhelming sadness, general lack of interest, feelings of hopelessness, guilt, withdrawal/isolation, feelings of being a burden to others

- 35.1% of ND middle school students report feeling sad or hopeless (almost every day for 2 weeks or more in a row during the past year).
- 36% of ND high school students report feeling sad or hopeless (almost every day for 2 weeks or more in a row during the past year).
- Among those who report feeling sad, hopeless, angry or anxious, 21% of ND High School students report they would most likely talk with their parent or other adult member about their feelings.

What NOT to say or do

“You don’t mean that. You don’t really want to die.”

– Don’t dismiss their feelings. They need reassurance that things in life can be difficult and that you are there to help them.

“Things could be worse.”

– It may not seem like a big deal to you, but it is for them in this moment. They are feeling that they are not able to get over it. Help provide them with HOPE.

“Suicide is selfish.”

– Those not experiencing these feelings see it from a different lens than those who are going through it. Many people feel they are burdening their family by staying alive.

What you need to say and do

Remain calm and listen. Be a safe person. As a parent, you want to fix it right now and you’re scared and uncomfortable with the situation. You want to ensure they feel safe and that they can talk to you. Don’t try to intervene and fix it immediately. A good rule: Say 2 words to every 100 words your child says.

Validate and Encourage: Use “I” messages to help validate their feelings. Use a safe and non-threatening approach. Ask them- “Is there anything you want to talk about” or “is there anything I can do?”

Ask the tough question - “Have you thought about suicide” or “Have you thought about ending your life?” Then listen. You’ll never find out if you don’t ask. You asking gives them the opportunity to feel safe and feel like they are allowed to share.

Potential responses to help guide you:

“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.”



Where can you go for help?

If your child has a plan to take their life, you NEED to seek help. If they have access and a plan, dial 911. If they are sharing and willing to get help - reach out to your local mental health professional or dial 988. Professionals can help when your own emotions are overwhelmed.