

FAMILY MENTAL HEALTH

Lessons & Activities

How to Talk to Someone Who Is Struggling

- “If you believe that a friend or family member is suicidal, you can play a role in suicide prevention by pointing out the alternatives, showing that you care, and getting a doctor or psychologist involved.” —*HelpGuide.org*
- This lesson will teach families how to appropriately talk to someone who is struggling with suicidal thoughts.

Parent Pre-reading

One of the major parts of suicide prevention is knowing what to do in situations relating to suicidal thoughts. Knowing how to respond could save a life. If you notice any of the suicide warning signs or think someone may be struggling, reach out and speak up! Anyone could be struggling; you will never know unless you ask. This gives the individual the opportunity to share feelings and concerns, which in turn most likely gives him or her great relief from any underlying emotions.

Suicide prevention requires proactivity. If no one takes any action, those who are struggling might not get the help they need before it's too late. Though it may be hard to start this conversation with your children or others, you need to do it. Assume that you are the only one who will take the time to help. Talking shows that you care and is the first step to someone getting help. It is important to note that asking others if they are struggling with suicidal thoughts will not put the idea in their head or increase their chances of attempting suicide.

Preparation

Print out enough copies of the activity page so each member of your family has a sheet, or just print off one copy to share.

Preview the videos that go along with this lesson.

Optional: Have a copy of *The Rabbit Listened* by Cori Doerrfeld available to read with your family.

Lesson

If you notice someone struggling and worry that they may be thinking of hurting themselves, speak out, either through telling a trusted adult or opening a conversation with the person you're worried about. Starting a conversation like this may seem hard, but it's important to do so. One way to start is to use the “I” message. For example, you could say, “I noticed you seem really sad lately; are you ok?” or “I wanted to check in because you haven't seemed yourself lately.” The “I” message shows the person you are concerned without sounding confrontational or suspicious. Try to have the conversation in a safe place so the person will be more willing to be open with you.

If, however, the person doesn't open up, don't give up! Keep being that person's friend. Invite the person to activities, talk about something you know that person likes, etc. In time, that person may build trust in you and will be open to having a conversation. If the person shows any of the suicide warning signs but won't talk, don't wait; talk to an adult and get help for that person right away.

After the person opens up, the next part is listening. Oftentimes people who are thinking of suicide want to be heard and for someone to care. You can do both of these things through something called "whole body listening." This demonstrates how different body parts can be used to listen and show someone you care. These good listening skills for each body part are as follows:

- **Eyes.** Put your phone down and look at the person talking. Not only does this show them they are important enough to hold your attention, but it also gives you the chance to watch their body language, which is their way of communicating nonverbally.
- **Ears.** Instead of assuming what the other person is going to say, use your ears to listen carefully to what the other person is saying.
- **Mouth.** Keep yours closed until the other person has finished.
- **Hands & Feet.** By keeping your hands and feet still, you are eliminating distractions, keeping even more focus on what is being said and the person talking.
- **Brain.** Think about what the person is saying.
- **Heart.** Show that you care about what the person is saying by asking clarifying questions or repeating what the person said to show you listened and want to make sure you're understanding correctly.

After listening, if you are concerned about the person, ask, "Are you thinking about taking your life?" Your response to this question and whatever else the person confides in you also plays an important role in getting the person help. Should the person confide that he or she is in fact thinking about self-harm, here are some do's and don'ts to help guide your response:

Don't:

- **Give advice.** Words like, "Just try to be happy," or "Things will look better tomorrow" will not help someone suddenly feel better.
- **Act shocked.** Even how you ask the question is important. Phrasing it as, "You're not thinking about suicide, are you?" is not helpful.
- **Argue.** Words like, "But you have so much to live for!" or "You don't really want to hurt yourself" will not make someone suddenly change their mind about self-harm.
- **Try to fix their problems.** You aren't qualified to "fix" their problems, but there are trained professionals who can help them manage their problems.
- **Blame yourself.** If you talk to someone and they still practice self-harm, it's not your fault.
- **Promise not to tell anyone.** An angry friend is better than a friend who isn't there anymore. Never tell someone you'll keep their plans of suicide secret.

Do:

- **Offer hope.** Let them know that there are people who can help and there are alternatives to suicide. You can even offer to go with that person to get help.
- **Be sincere.** Ask, "How can I best support you?" Let them know that you are there for them and care about them no matter how they are feeling right now.
- **Remove lethal means.** If someone tells you they are feeling suicidal, make sure to remove guns, drugs, and other lethal means from that person's vicinity.

- **Stay with the person.** If someone is in crisis, don't leave them alone. Stay with them until you are sure they will be ok.
- **Be nonjudgmental.** You don't know how that person is feeling or what happened to bring them to these types of thoughts. Let them know it's ok for them to have those feelings but that it's important to get help with those feelings.
- **Enlist more help.** Tell an adult or a professional that the person needs help. Don't try to do it all on your own. Make sure that trained individuals are involved.

Adapting for Younger Children

Summarize the lesson in a few simple sentences that your child can understand. Illustrate that if a friend came to your child with a broken arm, your child would not be expected to fix it; the friend needs a doctor. Your child can help the friend get the needed care by telling an adult. The same goes for if a friend is feeling really sad and the feelings won't go away. Adults know how to find people who are trained to help those struggling with complex feelings or unsafe situations. Let your child know that if anyone says anything that brings feelings of uncertainty or makes your child uncomfortable that your child needs to tell an adult, such as a parent.

To help your child better understand the lesson, you could read *The Rabbit Listened* by Cori Doerrfeld. It's a story about a child who is upset. Others try to help, but only the rabbit simply takes the time to listen. Some questions you could ask and points you could go over after reading the story include the following:

- Why didn't Taylor feel better when the animals gave suggestions?
- What did Rabbit do differently from the other animals?
- Have you ever felt like no one was hearing you when you needed to talk to someone?
- How can we be effective and kind listeners when someone is struggling?
- Remind your family that if someone is thinking about hurting themselves, they should listen and then tell an adult.

Activity

Split into two teams, Team 1 and Team 2. Read and role-play the scenarios on the following activity page, working as a team to figure out how to respond to the struggling friend. Practice using the "I" message and whole body listening skills.

Video

The first video talks about how to help someone who is thinking of suicide. The second video talks about how to be a good listener. The third video is about how teens and adults can be good listeners.

<https://youtu.be/CAMAnPRLMH8>

https://youtu.be/z_-rNd7h6z8

<https://youtu.be/-BdbiZcNBXg>

“Are You OK?”

Scenario 1:

Team 1: You have been really angry lately. You lash out at your classmates and yell at your siblings. You feel like the anger just gets bigger and bigger and won't go away. Everything seems to be going wrong. You start to wonder what the point is anymore.

Team 2: You notice your friend, who is usually calm and quiet, has been really angry for a whole week now. You are worried that something might be going on.

Scenario 2:

Team 2: You started feeling really sad after your parents got a divorce. You blame yourself for their split and even start cutting your arms. You try to wear long sleeves all the time to hide your cuts, but sometimes you forget.

Team 1: You notice that your sibling is wearing long sleeves all the time. Once you think you even saw marks on your sibling's arms. It made you feel scared.

Scenario 3:

Team 1: You are a star player on the school football team. However, you didn't play very well in the last two games, and you were benched the following game. Soon after, your girlfriend broke up with you. You feel like your life is out of control. You miss a few practices and start experimenting with drugs.

Team 2: You notice your teammate has missed a few practices. You heard his girlfriend broke up with him, and you wonder how he is dealing with everything.

Scenario 4:

Team 2: You are usually the top of your math class, but lately, you have been showing up to school in grungy clothes and even skip showering. You have a heavy feeling of sadness you can't seem to get rid of and you don't know what to do.

Team 1: You notice the girl who sits in front of you in math class has started not caring about her appearance. She used to be the best student, but suddenly her test scores were coming back low. You don't know her very well, but you feel like something might be wrong.

References

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, “When Someone Is at Risk.” Retrieved from <https://afsp.org/find-support/when-someone-is-at-risk/>.

Befrienders Worldwide, “Helping a Suicidal Friend or Relative.” Retrieved from <https://www.befrienders.org/helping-a-friend>.

HelpGuide.org, “Suicide Prevention.” Retrieved from <http://helpguide.org/articles/suicide-prevention/suicide-prevention.htm>.

Additional Resources

The following are just a few of the websites, numbers, and apps that provide convenient information about suicide prevention. Click on the icon to find out more about the resource.

