



# How to Talk with Your Teen about Suicide

Whether at school, in books, on television, or over social media, teenagers will inevitably encounter the topic of suicide. As a parent, it can be challenging to know what to say about suicide—and how exactly to say it. Still, it's far better to acknowledge the subject and address its impact on your teen than to say nothing at all. By communicating openly with your son or daughter in an intentional, informed, and compassionate way, you can help your teen understand how to assist their peers in getting help if they are upset or coping with a death by suicide. This resource offers some concrete tips on how to approach this sensitive topic with your teen.

## Educate Yourself

Take time to prepare for the conversation by educating yourself on risk factors, which are the personal and environmental characteristics that can increase the likelihood of suicide. Examples of risk factors in teens include alcohol and other substance use, access to a firearm, mental illness, and experiencing a sense of hopelessness. Learn about protective factors, those personal and environmental characteristics that can decrease the likelihood of suicide in teens. Examples of protective factors include social connectedness, restricted access to firearms, a positive sense of self-esteem, and the presence of a caring adult. Also, know the warning signs of suicide.

## Empower Your Teen

Many teens who are at risk may not directly talk about suicide. However, they may say something, do something, or write or draw something that comes to the attention of a peer or a friend. They can serve as **"gatekeepers,"** that is individuals who are aware of the warning signs of suicide and how to take action.

Parents can empower their teenagers to be gatekeepers. ***"Don't be afraid to speak up if you feel like a peer is at risk."*** Help your teen identify trusted adults at home and at school to whom they can talk if a friend or other peer seems to be in trouble. Then, provide action steps that your teen can take as a gatekeeper if he or she thinks a friend or other peer may be at risk:

1. Take seriously any warning signs (such as an expression of hopelessness over social media or a suicidal message via text).
2. React immediately by telling a trusted adult. (As a parent, you might add, ***"I hope I am a trusted adult for you."***)

## Talking to Your Teen after a Death by Suicide

In the hours, days, and weeks following a death by suicide of a friend, other peer, or adult in the community, it is an especially important time to talk with your teen about suicide. In such circumstances, there are concrete steps that you can take as a parent to be supportive. Here are some ideas to consider and things you can say to your teen.

### Safe Messaging

*When talking about suicide with your teen, it's important to keep these messages in mind:*

- Everyone can play a role in prevention efforts.
- Build trust with your son or daughter. Practice compassion and empathy.
- Treatment and support are available.
- Young people are resilient, and they can get better!

### Warning Signs

*The following signs may indicate a person may be at risk for suicide:*

- Talking about or making plans for suicide, including suicidal notes, texts, social media posts, or threats, such as "I'm going to kill myself."
- Expressing hopelessness about the future, such as "No one will miss me" or "The world will be better without me."
- Displaying severe or overwhelming emotional pain or distress.



- **Be honest.** *“Talking about suicide is difficult for me, too.”*
- **Replace rumors with facts.** *“Rumors can be very harmful and hurt those who are grieving.”*
- **Allow your teen to express his or her feelings.** Validate a range of your teen’s reactions, whatever those may be. *“Everyone responds to shocking news differently: Some may look numb. Some may get angry. Some may cry, and others may even act silly.”*
- **Express empathy.** *“I am so sorry that this has happened to you.”*
- **Remind your teen of his or her role as a gatekeeper.** Ask about your teen’s peers who may also have been affected by this suicide: *“Is there anyone you may be concerned about?”* Remind your teen of the action steps to take if they think a friend or other peer may be at risk.
- **Brainstorm with your teen ways that they can grieve.** Plan to go to the funeral with your teen or to help reach out to the family of the deceased. *“I will help you get through this. If you want to go to the funeral, I will go with you.”*
- **Remind your teen that suicide is complex.** Your teen may hear or read about simplistic explanations for suicide, such as *“the bullying caused it” or “the breakup of a romance caused it. Reassure your teen, “Suicide is a very complex thing, and no one person, no one thing, is ever to blame.”* Some teenagers who were close to the deceased may need more reassurance: *“You are not to blame, and this is not your fault.”*

## Myths about Suicide

Here are some common misconceptions about suicide:

- Talking about suicide puts ideas into a young person’s head.
- Most suicides occur with little to no warning.
- Only experts can prevent suicide.
- If individuals are really intent on killing themselves, there is nothing that we can do to stop them.
- Younger children don’t have the capacity to think about suicide.

Here are some truths about suicide:

- Studies have shown that talking about suicide does not put ideas in a child’s head—as a matter of fact, it lowers anxiety.
- Most suicidal individuals do give some warning that they are in emotional pain.
- Teens are ambivalent about taking their lives. Any action by a well-caring adult can help prevent a young person from dying by suicide.
- Young people who experience suicidal thoughts and behaviors can go on to lead normal, healthy lives.

## Resources for Parents

**The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** is a network of call centers that offer free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

**Lifeline Crisis Text Line** is a free, 24/7, confidential text service for people in crisis: <https://www.crisistextline.org/>. Text HOME to 741741 anytime, about any kind of crisis.

**The Trevor Project** is a national, 24-hour, toll-free confidential suicide hotline for LGBT teens: <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

**The Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide** provides resources for parents on teen suicide and the role of parents in prevention: <http://www.sptsusa.org/>

## Acknowledgement

Our thanks to Richard Lieberman, MA, NCSP Graduate School of Education, Loyola Marymount University, for sharing this knowledge and expertise in the development of this handout.

