

Talking to your teen about depression and suicide



Unfortunately, suicide is the second leading cause of death for children and youths aged 10 to 24. It is also preventable.

Stay informed and accessible

There are several key things parents and caregivers can do to support the mental health of their teens.

- Become aware of suicide risk factors and warning signs
- Practice having caring conversations
- Make yourself available to your teen
- Remember that help is always available

What are the risk factors?

Many teens who attempt (or are successful at) suicide have a mental health condition, or have experienced troubling events in their lives. Some risk factors include:

- Depression or other mental health disorder
- Uncertainty about sexual orientation
- Loss of (or conflict with) a family member or close friend
- Experiencing the suicide of a family member or friend
- History of physical/sexual abuse
- Family history of mood disorders or suicidal behaviors
- Substance abuse
- Exposure to violence or bullying



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Know the warning signs

How do you tell the difference between normal teen moodiness and something more? Here are some signs that may indicate thoughts of self-harm:

- Writing or talking about suicide (“I won’t be a problem for you much longer”)
- Withdrawal from social contact
- Lack of pleasure in things they used to enjoy
- Mood swings
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Feeling trapped or hopeless
- Changes in normal routine (eating, sleeping patterns)
- Risky or self-destructive behaviors
- Giving away belongings when there is no logical explanation for why

Starting the conversation

If you think your teen may be at risk, asking the wrong questions or having the wrong reactions can often bring the discussion to a quick end. Here are some tips that may help keep the conversation going.

DO

- Focus on your child’s safety without making it feel like a cross examination.
- Actively listen and validate their feelings.
- Use body language that shows you’re paying attention.
- Follow their cues and ask open-ended questions to get a better idea of what’s going on. “Tell me more about that... how did it make you feel?”
- Let your teen have plenty of input on their treatment plan. They’ll be more likely to follow it.
- Leave an open invitation for later if your teen doesn’t want to talk right now.
- Find support for yourself.

DO NOT

- Be afraid to talk to your child about mental health and suicide. It can start simply by asking, “Are you okay?”
- Freak out if your teen says he’s been thinking about suicide. Reacting in a way that overwhelms could scare them into silence.
- Worry that talking about suicide will plant the idea in your teen’s head.
- Offer quick fixes or solutions, which may shut down further dialog.

Many teens may not see that it’s possible to turn their lives around, and that suicide is a permanent response – not a solution – to temporary problems.

If you think your teen is in immediate danger, call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800.273.TALK (800.273.8255).



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