

# KNOW! How to Discuss Suicide



September is National Suicide Prevention Awareness Month. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for children, adolescents, and young adults ages 15 to 24. For young people, connection to supportive adults in their lives can act as a protective factor against suicide risk. Understanding how to talk about suicide is critical to developing that connection. However, it is often difficult to start a conversation about suicide and help someone who is experiencing suicidal thoughts.

The [988 Suicide and Crisis Line's #BeThe1To campaign](#) offers 5 evidence-based action steps for communicating about suicide.

## Step 1: Ask

Ask questions like “How are you feeling?”, “Are you thinking about suicide?”, and “How can I help?” Engaging in non-judgmental, supportive, and direct communication opens the door for an honest dialogue about their emotions. Be sure to listen calmly and take them seriously. Let them know that you understand and appreciate their courage in sharing something so difficult with you. Pay attention to the reasons that they are in pain as well as their own reasons for living.

Remember that the language you use matters. Stigma surrounding suicidal thoughts can prevent young people from seeking support. Avoid asking leading or shaming questions, like “You’re not thinking of suicide, are you?” Instead, reassure them that there are no taboo thoughts and that you are a safe person.

Do not be afraid to directly ask if they are thinking of suicide or self-harm. It is a myth that talking about suicide will “plant the idea” in someone’s head. In fact, acknowledging and discussing suicide can [reduce suicidal ideation](#).

## Step 2: Be There

Offer your physical presence, a phone call, or any way of showing that you support and care about the person at risk. Make sure that you follow through on your offer of support. Do not commit to anything that you are not able to accomplish. If you can’t be there for them, talk with them about who might be an effective source of help. Being present for someone with thoughts of suicide saves lives. By increasing someone’s sense of connectedness and reducing their isolation, being there for them helps to alleviate feelings of hopelessness and other risk factors.

## Step 3: Keep them Safe

If they express thoughts of suicide, ask questions to better understand the severity of danger they are in: Have they tried to kill themselves before? Do they know how they would do it? Do they have a plan? What access do they have to their plan? If they indicate that they are in crisis, connect them with immediate resources like 988, the suicide prevention lifeline, or local crisis services. It is important to remember that, for many people, particularly people of color, people with disabilities, veterans, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community, these immediate resources may not be safe.

Resources like the [Trevor Lifeline](#), the [Trans Lifeline](#), and the [Veterans Crisis Line](#), are available for LGBTQIA+ youth, the transgender community, and veterans. For people who are a part of the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) community, there are various local, statewide, and national mental health resources available. [Cuyahoga County Community College](#) and the [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#) have compiled lists of key mental health resources for BIPOC folks experiencing suicidal thoughts.

Put time and distance between them and their chosen method. You should prevent their access to lethal means by practicing [safe storage](#) for items like firearms and prescription medications. If they do not have a plan, keep talking. Share your own experiences with mental health and continue listening to their experiences.

### Step 4: Help them Connect

Collaborate with them to connect them to supports and resources within your community. Do not dictate the solution. Instead, acknowledge their pain and offer to help them figure this out, find help, and learn more.

Explore potential supports, like mental health professionals and organizations in your community, with them to create a safety net in the event of a crisis. You may want to help them develop a safety plan that includes how to identify when they are experiencing severe thoughts of suicide as well as what to do and who to contact in those moments.

### Step 5: Follow Up

Continue to check in with them to see how they are doing and if there is anything you can help them with. Even small acts like reaching out with a caring card shows support, increases connectedness, and can reduce their risk for suicide.

Talking to young people about suicide is important, especially if you have noticed any [warning signs](#) of suicide risk. Even if a young person in your life is not experiencing thoughts of suicide, having meaningful conversations about mental and emotional health is key. Consistently checking in with how they are feeling and truly listening to their experiences establishes a strong connection that may encourage them to seek help when they need it.

#### Resources:



In a crisis?

**Text HOME to 741741 to connect with a Crisis Counselor**

Free 24/7 support at your fingertips



#### Sources:

- [Teen Suicides: What Are the Risk Factors?](#)
- [How and why the 5 Steps can Help](#)
- [How to Talk to Children and Teens About Suicide: A Guide for Parents](#)
- [Destigmatizing Language About Suicide](#)
- [Lock2Live](#)
- [Does asking about suicide and related behaviours induce suicidal ideation? What is the evidence?](#)
- [Suicide in Children and Teens](#)

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