

• What A Parent Can Do

Do's and Don'ts

If you have noticed a pattern of behavior in a young person that is consistent with some of the risk factors and warning signs described in subsequent sections, it is time to take action. Here are some tips on the next steps to take:

Remain calm

Though you may be shocked and overwhelmed, it is important to try to stay relaxed. By remaining calm, you are creating a comfortable atmosphere for the person who is suicidal to open up to you and reach out for your help. Do not give up hope or begin to panic. If an individual is opening up to you, he or she must trust you and feel comfortable with you. Do not doubt yourself in the situation. It is important that the child have someone with them, so be sure to not leave him or her alone. Remember, what your child really needs right now is a parent.

Be prepared to talk about suicide

Four out of five completed suicides gave clear warning signs before the attempt. While death is an uncomfortable subject for many people, it is important to be able to talk about it openly and honestly. There should be no fear in talking to young people about suicide. By discussing it, you are not putting the idea in their head or increasing the likelihood of suicidal behavior. An open discussion can help decrease some of the anxiety experienced by suicidal youth and come as a relief to them that someone else cares about them and wants to help them. Talking about suicide can help youth see the other options they have. Further, asking if they are suicidal can be helpful because some youth view this question as permission to feel the way they do, making it easier for them to open up.

In talking to a young person, it is important not to minimize or dismiss their problems. Instead, try to provide them with reassurance. Be sure to acknowledge their fear, sadness, and other emotions, and tell them you care about them and want to help them. Also, it is important to keep from encouraging feelings of guilt and being judgmental.

Since people who are contemplating suicide feel so alone and helpless, the most important thing to do, if you think a friend or loved one is suicidal, is to communicate with him or her openly and frequently. Make it clear that you care; stress your willingness to listen. Your first question should be whether or not he or she is having suicidal thoughts. If the answer is yes, then ask the individual if he or she has a plan of how to do it. If the youth answers yes again, ask if he or she has obtained whatever is needed to do it, and if so, if a time has been

determined. Getting the answers to these questions can help you evaluate the mindset of the youth and get him or her the necessary help.

Be prepared to ACT

When a suicidal youth wants to open up to you, don't be afraid to get involved and take action to get them the help. If someone is suicidal, he or she must not be left alone. Try to get the person to seek help immediately from his or her doctor or the nearest hospital emergency room, or call 911. It is also important to limit the person's access to firearms, medications, or other lethal methods for suicide.

Do not try to play the hero

Though it is important to act immediately, it is better not to act alone. Helping a suicidal person is not easy. It can take a lot of time and energy and bring forth an array of emotions. Having the support of others can help you help someone else. Additionally, you should never attempt to physically take away a weapon. You do not want to put yourself in a dangerous situation, nor do you want to aggravate the suicidal person.

Do not promise confidentiality

Though an individual may ask you to guarantee confidentiality, try to avoid making this promise, and be prepared to break it if you do. Keeping a child's promise is not as important as saving a child's life. Though your child may be hurt and angry initially, you must remember that he or she is unable to think clearly right now, and realize it may be time to seek professional help.

Don't fall into the "Not My Child Syndrome"

It is all too easy to think of suicide as a terrible tragedy that happens to other people's families. We want to believe that children who experience "suicidal thought" come from dysfunctional families that may have a history of family violence and drug abuse. While it is true that these factors increase the risk of suicide, it's important to understand that suicide crosses all racial, economic, social and ethnic lines. No one is automatically exempted. All of us need to be aware of the warning signs of "suicidal thought" and know how to respond if the behavior of the youth causes concern.