

HOW TO TALK TO: ABOUT SUICIDE A STUDENT

Let's talk

The statistics around youth suicide are horrifying. Suicide is the leading cause of death in young people between 15 and 24 years of age, and accounts for more deaths than car accidents. The number of deaths by suicide in young people 15-24 is the highest it has been in 10 years. An average of 319 young Australians 15-24 take their lives each year. Alarmingly, for every one suicide there are approximately 100-200 suicide attempts, in this age group.

Risks of suicidal behaviour increase in adolescence and young adulthood, particularly for the socially marginalised. The most prevalent risks include depression, alcohol abuse, mental disorders, antisocial behaviour, sexual abuse, physical abuse, poor peer relationships, suicidal behaviour by friends, family discord, family suicidal behaviour, unsupportive parents, living apart from parents, and social contagion.

While the statistics are horrifying, it is comforting to know that youth suicide is mostly preventable. In fact, only some think about it as a real option. Knowing the warning signs, talking to your student and linking them with support, can provide them with what they need to get through this challenging time.

Talking to a student about suicide

Young people may not always seek help and so it helps if the adults who interact with them regularly can identify the warning signs.

Students may be resistant to talking about their feelings with a teacher, especially if there is no established relationship between the student and teacher, and this of course will differ from student to student.

Avoid singling out the student in front of their peers and try to approach it as a casual conversation outside of class. Describe what you have observed. For example, "I noticed you haven't been yourself in class recently – you've been contributing less and less – is everything okay?"

Let them know you are concerned and that you care, but try not to overwhelm them. The most valuable thing is to listen and show you are there to help if they need it.

It is important not to dismiss their feelings. Instead, simply acknowledge how they feel to avoid appearing judgemental.

Whether your student wants to talk about how they are

Common warning signs

- Drop in school grades
- Becoming socially withdrawn (e.g. staying home for long periods of time or avoiding contact with family and friends)
- Behaving recklessly (e.g. driving recklessly) and taking unnecessary and uncharacteristic risks; Researching suicide methods;
- Self-harming
- Making direct suicide threats (e.g. "I want to die")
- Making indirect suicide threats (e.g. "I don't want to be here anymore")
- Displaying feelings of low self-worth
- Becoming disconnected from family and friends
- Suddenly quitting important activities (e.g. extracurricular activities)
- Mood swings and irritability
- Writing suicide notes

feeling or not, you can help them by providing them with the support options available.

Seeking help

There are many support avenues and resources available to young people.

The first point of call should be a school counsellor or school psychologist, who are trained in helping students navigate these sorts of issues.

School counsellors or psychologists will typically take ownership of helping the student through counselling sessions or referring them to external services.

As the teacher, it can help to: check in with the student from time to time; praise them as you see them improve (e.g. through better grades or higher classroom engagement); or giving them some extra time with certain tasks if you notice them struggling.

Youth Insearch is available to support young people dealing with life challenges. For more information head to www.youthinsearch.org.au or call us at 02 9659 6122.



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