

How to Talk to Someone About Suicide

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No one is immune to suicide, which is why it is vital for friends and family members to be prepared if they suspect someone they care about is considering suicide. In fact, most of the time it is not a mental health professional to whom a person considering suicide first expresses their thoughts and feelings, but a trusted friend, colleague, or family member. It may feel uncomfortable to talk about suicide, but asking a single question can save a life.

Bringing up the Topic of Suicide

When talking about suicide with someone, it is important to prepare yourself by researching local mental health providers and having their contact information on hand. Once you're ready, follow the six steps below to move from having a regular conversation to asking the suicide question.

Steps 1 and 2: Transitioning from Regular Conversation

If you think someone is considering suicide, you can transition from nearly any conversation to talk to them about it. Mention specific suicide warning signs and risk factors you have observed with genuine empathy and concern. For instance, "I know you just lost your job. That must be really tough. I've also overheard you say that other people would be better off if you were dead, and your other friends and family say they haven't seen you in a while. As a friend, I'm worried about you."

Step 3: Ask Open-Ended Questions

Ask the person if they would like to talk about what they are experiencing. Individuals thinking about suicide are often afraid of being judged by others, so by asking permission you are demonstrating respect for their

privacy while also encouraging them to discuss their experiences in a supportive environment. For example, ask, "Do you want to share what you have been going through with me?"

Step 4: Allow a Free Response

When you ask open-ended questions, you may receive a detailed and extensive response. Practice active listening, be aware of your nonverbal cues, and do not interrupt or pass judgement. You should also make sure you both have plenty of time to talk and refrain from giving advice or offering simple solutions.

Step 5: Validate Their Feelings

After they finish responding to your concerns, applaud the person for their courage: "Thank you so much for sharing all of this with me."

Ways to Ask the Question

“Are you thinking about suicide?”

“Are you thinking about taking/ending your life?”

“Are you thinking about killing yourself?”

Step 6: Ask the Suicide Question

You can effectively transition to the suicide question by saying, “Some people going through what you are experiencing might be thinking about suicide as an option, and I’m wondering if you are thinking about suicide.” Research has shown that it is more effective to ask the suicide question directly because you are more likely to get a direct response.¹

If the Answer is Yes...

- Thank the person for opening up to you.
- Ask if they created a plan for their suicide.
- Do not leave the person alone.

- Use “We statements,” like “We will get through this”
- Suggest going to someone who can help, such as a counselor, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline number 1-800-273-8255 and Crisis Text Line by texting 4HOPE to 741-741, or 911.

If the Answer is No...

Sometimes, a person who is considering suicide might deny it when asked. This may be because they are uncomfortable, nervous, or resolute in their decision to die. Study their nonverbals and reaffirm your commitment to getting them help if they need it. Even if they are not suicidal, they may still benefit from mental health services.

The person may also offer a true “no,” at which point it is still valuable to remind them that you care about them and are committed to supporting them through whatever difficult times they are facing.

For More Information:

- Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) Training: <https://qprinstitute.com/>
- Working Minds Training: <https://www.coloradodepressioncenter.org/workingminds/>
- Risk Factors and Warning Signs of Suicide from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: <https://afsp.org/risk-factors-protective-factors-and-warning-signs>
- How the 5 steps can help someone who is suicidal, from *Bethe1to*: <https://www.bethe1to.com/bethe1to-steps-evidence/>

- SAMHSA’s Mental Health Provider Locator: <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>

Reference List

1. Frequently Asked Questions about Suicide. National Institute of Mental Health website. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/suicide-faq>. Published 2021. Accessed November 22, 2021.

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