

Hazelden Lifelines® Prevention

Frequently Asked Questions for Parents

Q: Who considers suicide?

A: In general, people of all ages who are depressed or having trouble coping with their feelings may consider suicide if they feel overwhelmed and don't have other coping skills. People of all ages, races, faiths, cultures, occupations, and income levels die by suicide. Both popular, well-connected people who seem to have everything going for them and those who are less well-off die by suicide. Suicidal youth come from all kinds of families, rich and poor, well-adjusted and dysfunctional, two-parent and single-parent. It is important to understand that suicidal behavior knows no boundaries.

Q: Can teens or preteens really be suicidal? They haven't lived long enough to know what real problems are!

A: In part, that is exactly the problem. Adults widely believe that childhood is a time for fun, free from the stress and problems of "real" life. However, often that is not the reality. We live in an information-packed and high-stress society. Competition for college acceptance and jobs is fierce. Young people are expected to go to school full-time, participate in school activities, work twenty to twenty-five hours a week in a part-time job, and manage to get their chores and homework done on the side. It doesn't leave much time for fun. Many children and teens don't get enough sleep. This tends to make them easily frustrated and angry. The expectations placed on young people in our society can be very difficult to handle, because they have not yet developed the skills needed to deal with these stresses. A loss that seems minor to an adult can feel life-threatening to a young person if they cannot find a way to cope with the feelings or find a solution. Also, they feel the need to solve a problem as fast as they can in an age of email, instant messaging, and smartphones, and a culture obsessed with "now." Seeing the world from the perspective of a young person can help us understand a little better that what seems minor to us can be catastrophic to them.

Q: Why do people choose to die by suicide?

A: Suicidal behavior is one of the most complicated human behaviors. This question cannot be answered briefly. There aren't any definitive risk factors that can accurately predict the likelihood of imminent danger of suicide for any one person. It is fair to say that suicidal people are experiencing varying degrees of outside stresses, internal conflict, and neurobiological dysfunction, and these factors contribute to their state of mind. Depression, anxiety, conduct disorders, bullying, and substance use or addiction all contribute to the possibility of suicide, but they do not cause suicide. A "final straw" for suicide is usually the last thing that a person who kills himself or herself is thinking about, and many left behind want to blame that person or event, but the final straw was *not* the cause of the suicide. Many people who have killed themselves had no final straw that others could see. So, the reasons behind a suicide often remain a mystery. The one thing we do know is that the thought that death can solve a life problem is an illogical solution generated by someone who is in a crisis state and not thinking clearly. That's what makes suicide prevention even more important!

Q: Won't people think I am a bad parent or guardian if my child is suicidal?

A: Some people may be quick to judge and not understand that, given a certain set of circumstances, any of us could think about suicide. More likely, people will think you are a caring parent or guardian if you are doing something to keep your child alive, like getting your child professional help. Mental health professionals deal with suicidal individuals every day. They understand how difficult life can be for a young person and that parents and guardians cannot protect their children from all the stress in the world. What you can do is listen to your child and act when he or she cannot.

Q: Every time I ask, my child tells me that I won't understand. How can I help her to talk?

A: Acknowledge that you might not understand but that you care very much and you will try to understand. And remember, the key to understanding what someone is saying is by *listening* to them. It can be very difficult to listen when someone tells you they want to die, but the three most important words in your response to your child need to be *"Tell me more."* Don't preach, judge, get angry, or be dismissive.

You also need to recognize that you might not be the trusted adult your child chooses to confide in. Support your child in helping her identify another adult. An additional option is to tell her you understand that she doesn't want to talk to you, but to ask whether she would agree to talk about it with someone else, like a counselor. If your child agrees, make sure to follow up on it; you can even make the initial call yourself.

Q: My child listens to horrible music. I'm worried that the violent lyrics will make him kill himself.

A: While you may not like your child's choice in music, it is unlikely to make him kill himself. In fact, for most young people, music—even violent music—may allow them to vent some of their anger and frustration to help them feel better. However, there are situations where a young person who is already feeling depressed or feeling alienated may choose a certain type of music that can make those feelings stronger. Discuss your concerns with your child and make a deal that if he feels like hurting or killing himself that he will talk to you or another trusted adult.

Q: How can I help my child not to feel suicidal?

A: Begin by talking about suicide before it becomes an issue and your child is in crisis. We need to acknowledge that suicide is an option that young people consider, and we must open the channels of communication so they have somewhere to turn where they know they will be understood. One of the major reasons youth don't turn to adults is that they feel they will not be understood. **The Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide website (www.sptsusa.org)** can help you educate yourself about suicide and what you can do to help your child.

Q: I think my child may be suicidal. What do I say to her?

A: Suicide can be a difficult topic to discuss, especially with young people. Here are some possible conversation starters:

- You haven't seemed like yourself recently. What's been going on?
- I know that some difficult things have happened recently. I'm concerned about how you're feeling.

When you've opened the conversation, it's important to ask directly about suicidal intent. The following questions may be useful:

- Do you feel like things will never get better?
- Have you been wanting to hurt or kill yourself as an answer to your problem?
- Have you ever thought about suicide? Are you suicidal now?

If your child is suicidal, it is important to remove all lethal means (dangerous items that could be used in a suicide act) from the household and get help. The **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-TALK (8255)**, can be accessed twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and will help you to determine what type of intervention is necessary. Even if your child does not indicate that he or she is feeling suicidal, seeking out help— from a school counselor, therapist, or faith leader—is always a good decision.

Q: What should I do if my child is talking about killing himself?

A: It is recommended that you follow the same three basic suicide intervention steps that have been taught to school faculty, staff, and students:

1. Show you care: listen carefully.
2. Ask about suicide: ask directly in a caring, nonconfrontational way.
3. Get help: stay with your child; call your local crisis line, the national hotline, or another source of help.