

OHIO SUICIDE PREVENTION FOUNDATION

How to Talk to Someone About Suicide

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, a person considering suicide first expresses their thoughts and feelings to a trusted friend, colleague, or family member.

Bringing up the Topic of Suicide

It may feel uncomfortable to talk about suicide, but asking a single question could save a life.

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, use the following six steps 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 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?"

Suicide Prevention Training Opportunities

OSPF supports suicide prevention training, including:

- Question, Persuade, and Refer (QPR): the three simple moves anyone can learn to help save a life from suicide. Community members learn:
 1. How to identify the warning signs and risk factors of suicide.
 2. How to ask the suicide question and persuade a suicidal person not to end their life.
 3. How to appropriately refer a suicidal person to behavioral healthcare professionals.
- VitalCog: Suicide Prevention in the Workplace. Trains organizations to proactively address the early warning signs of suicide in the workplace.

Find out more at https://www.ohiospf.org/events_calendar/

Step 4: Allow a Free Response

You may receive a detailed and extensive response when you ask open-ended questions. 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. 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."

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, or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline number 988.

If the Answer is No:

Sometimes, a person who is considering suicide might deny it when asked. This may be because they are uncomfortable or nervous. 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 you care about them and are committed to supporting them through whatever difficult times they are facing.

Resources

- Risk Factors and Warning Signs of Suicide. 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. BeThe1To. <https://www.bethe1to.com/bethe1to-steps-evidence/>
- SAMHSA's Mental Health Provider Locator. <https://findtreatment.gov/>

Reference

- 1 National Institute of Mental Health. Frequently Asked Questions about Suicide. Revised 2023. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/suicide-faq>. Accessed August 1, 2024.

ABOUT OHIO SUICIDE PREVENTION FOUNDATION

Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation (OSPF) educates, advocates for, and builds connections and support for individuals, families, and communities to prevent suicide.



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