

Tips for Communicating with Someone who May be Suicidal

Set the Stage

- Talk openly, candidly and calmly.
- Talk to the person alone and in private.
- Remove any distractions.
- Give yourself plenty of time. (1 hour)

Ask About Suicide

“Are you feeling so bad that you’ve thought about hurting yourself?”

“I’ve noticed that you’ve been pretty down lately. Have you thought about suicide?”

“What did you mean when you said I might not see you again?”

Communication Pitfalls

- Avoid expressing judgment, anger and blaming.
- Don’t say something like, “You wouldn’t do something crazy, would you?”

(This communicates your discomfort and judgment.)

- Don’t promise to keep what they tell you confidential, since you will likely need to consult and get support.

Positive Communication Skills

- **Convey your interest & sense of caring.**
- **Listen attentively.**
- **Use empathic reflection** to let the other person know that you understand and care. This is key to breaking through the sense of isolation that depressed and suicidal folks often feel.

Examples: “It must have felt like the world crashed around you when you were dropped from the team” . . . “Breaking up with him/her seems like just about the hardest thing you’ve ever been through.”

- **Try to convey a sense of hope and of other options.**

Examples: “I care about you, and I believe that we can get through this together . . . Things look pretty dark right now, but I think your situation may look very different to you in a week or two, once you’ve had time to adjust and figure out your next step” . . . “I know you’re in a lot of pain. Let’s figure out another way to take care of that pain.”

Making a Referral

Normalize

- “They deal with these situations every day . . . That’s what they are there for.”
- “They see a lot of depressed and suicidal students.”
- “When I was depressed two years ago, I saw a counselor and it really helped.”

Persuade

- “This problem is bigger than you and me. Let’s go talk to someone who can help you sort this out.”
- “It sounds like you’re depressed. They treat depression on campus at the Health Center.”
- “You say that you’d like to stop feeling so bad. I really believe that the Counseling Center can help you achieve this.”

Utilize your relationship

- “I’m invested in you, and I want you to get the help you need.”
- “I wouldn’t take you there, if I didn’t think they could help.”

- “When I was depressed two years ago, I saw a counselor and it really helped.”

Follow Up

- It’s always wise to follow up with the person and see if they got help.
- If they are suicidal, then it’s imperative that you do so.

Self Care

- Consult with others. You are not alone.
- Debrief with your support system and, if needed, a campus counselor.