

Talking with Students about Suicide

Suicide is one of the most tragic and concerning issues of our time. Offering factual information about this complex topic, and dispelling myths, is an important part of effective suicide prevention. School personnel have a tremendous opportunity to build student knowledge, as part of regular curriculum and/or in response to related events or student inquiries. Educators can often feel uncertain about discussing suicide at school because they worry that they may say or do the wrong thing. **This Info-Sheet provides guidance to educators as they approach this complex topic at school, as part of instruction and/or when this topic is raised by individual or small groups of students.** For more information, refer to the *Classroom Practice Guide on Talking with Students about Suicide*, consult with your board Mental Health Leader or another school mental health professional, and/or refer to your board's policies, procedures and guidelines.

Key Considerations for Talking about Suicide in the Classroom

- ✓ **Know your Audience** - Avoid providing information about mental illness and suicide in a school assembly format because it is hard to monitor individual student reactions and to provide appropriate support.
- ✓ **Think about Every Student** - While most students can manage emotions associated with this topic, those who struggle with mental illness or other vulnerabilities could be triggered if the material is too graphic or "close to home".
- ✓ **Be Prepared** – Set things up to minimize classroom disclosures, but be ready to listen and support individual students who approach you with a concern about themselves or a friend. Follow your school protocol if you are concerned about a student (ask your administrator if you aren't sure about the protocol).
- ✓ **Highlight Coping and Resilience** – Rather than solely focusing on suicide as a topic, use this as an opportunity to build understanding about mental illness, mental health and well-being, and healthy ways of coping with life's challenges.
- ✓ **Engage in Self-Care** – Suicide is a difficult and potentially triggering topic for staff and students alike, so take time to ensure that you are emotionally-ready for these conversations with students.

Before Introducing this Topic...

- Is this a good time to talk about suicide?
- Who can you consult with for support?
- How will you engage with your administrator(s)?
- How will you inform parents/guardians?
- Do you know local pathways and supports?
- How will you prepare students for this topic?

DO	DON'T
DO provide factual information about suicide	DON'T use images or stories that glamorize suicide
DO dispel myths	DON'T emphasize celebrity deaths by suicide
DO share warning signs	DON'T show images of those who have died by suicide
DO describe available supports and pathways	DON'T discuss methods of suicide or disclose your personal stories about suicide
DO encourage and model self-care and resiliency	DON'T suggest simple explanations for suicidal behaviour
DO encourage students to seek help from trusted adults	DON'T make suicide the sole topic of an assignment or essay
DO give help-line numbers and list adults who can help	DON'T use inappropriate language (e.g., use <i>died by suicide</i> not <i>committed suicide</i>)
DO inspire hope	DON'T portray suicide as a way to solve problems or get revenge

During Classroom Discussions about Suicide

- How will you monitor your students as they are learning this difficult material?
- How will you respond if students become distressed?
- Who will you contact if you have a concern about a student?
- How will you respond if a student reports a concern about a peer?

Occasionally, individual students, or small groups of students, raise the topic of suicide with a trusted educator. This may occur in reaction to something they have seen in the media or social media, on television/web, or related to a concern they have for themselves or someone else. Educators who are approached in this way have a good opportunity to **provide factual information, dispel myths, share warning signs, describe supports, and inspire hope** in a more contextualized manner. Many of the above suggestions related to classroom conversations about suicide can inform these smaller, more informal conversations that occur in school. Note that sometimes it is the role of the educator to help concerned peers so that they are not carrying too much responsibility for the well-being of another student. When students approach you about a peer, take the concern seriously and acknowledge their caring efforts towards help-seeking. Follow up quietly with the student and offer support. As a caring adult, you can help to ensure that struggling students get the professional support that they need so neither you, nor peers, are carrying this burden alone.

Key Considerations for Talking with Individual or Small Groups of Students about Suicide

- ✓ **Listen carefully** – Follow students' lead and listen carefully so that you can offer the right level of information, and address the concerns behind their questions. *Say things like, "Is there someone you are concerned about right now?"*
- ✓ **Give accurate information about suicide** – Help to validate and enhance good information they have acquired, and clarify any misconceptions or misinformation. *Say things like, "Suicide is complex and is not caused by a single event such as fighting with parents, or a bad grade, or the breakup of a relationship. It is usually linked to a mental health problem."*
- ✓ **Focus on resilience** – Keep the tone of the conversation positive, reinforcing coping skills and protective influences that can be relied upon in times of crisis. *Say things like, "What are some ways young people can cope with stress?"*
- ✓ **Encourage and support help-seeking** – Remind students of the importance of asking for help from a trusted adult, and help to ensure that students do not take on too much responsibility for the well-being of their peers. *Say things like, "Did you know that we have supports in our school, for any of you who may want to talk to someone?"*
- ✓ **Know your boundaries** – Educators are not mental health professionals, but they do have a role to play in providing support and assisting students to get more help when needed. Do not promise confidentiality. If a student has thoughts of suicide and an intent to act, others must be included in the conversation quickly to ensure the student is safe. *Say things like, "Thank you for sharing these personal thoughts and feelings with me. I am concerned for you and want to help you to get the help you need, and to keep you safe. It is important that we involve someone who can help us with this."*
- ✓ **Inspire hope** – Struggling with mental illness can be profoundly difficult, but the vast majority of people who receive appropriate help can recover and lead fulfilling lives. Help students to leave the conversation with a sense of hope and a plan for self-care. *Say things like, "No matter what happens, there is always, always, hope".*

If you are concerned for a student, ask them if they are okay.

Express concern about what you have observed, and show genuine caring.

Do not promise confidentiality.

Listen. Tell them they are not alone.

Guide them to professional help.

Know and follow your school board suicide prevention protocol.

(If you aren't sure about the pathway to support, ask your school administrator.)

If you are concerned about a student's immediate safety, do not leave them alone without adult supervision.

SOME WARNING SIGNS FOR SUICIDAL BEHAVIOUR (NOT AN EXHAUSTIVE LIST)

- Withdrawal from family, friends
- Expressing hopelessness, helplessness
- Feeling overwhelmed and out of control
- Changes in mood, agitation
- Quitting activities formerly enjoyed
- Decline in academic performance
- Changes in eating and sleeping
- Substance misuse
- Giving things away
- Preoccupation with death in student writing/art
- Talking about suicide or wanting to die
- Having a plan related to suicide

